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Fit for a King

Tracing the history of the Czech Republic, Jenerálka and IBTS

by

Petra Veselá

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Editorial

The theme of this issue of *JEBS* is Baptist identity – a theme which has received considerable attention recently. A major conference at IBTS in 2003, the International Conference on Baptist Studies (ICOBS), had as its theme ‘Baptist Identities’. A number of papers from this conference will be published by Paternoster Press in a volume edited by Toivo Pilli, the Director of Baptist and Anabaptist Studies at IBTS, and myself. The first volume in the series of ICOBS conference papers is available from Paternoster Press – *The Gospel in the World*, edited by D.W. Bebbington.

The aforementioned ICOBS conference was global in its coverage. Our concern through *JEBS* is to look at issues that relate in some way to European Baptist life and to feature mainly, though not exclusively, the work of European writers. It is good, therefore, to see in this issue fresh research and writing that is being done in Europe. Anthony Cross, Fellow of the Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, Regent’s Park College, Oxford, has contributed an insightful article, which examines the thinking of Baptist New Testament scholar, George Beasley-Murray.

Nigel Wright, Principal of Spurgeon’s College, London, has written before for *JEBS*. In his article in this issue he looks at questions relating to the vexed matter of church-state relationships. Although he analyses the British context, the way in which he does this has relevance to the challenges that Baptists face across Europe in their relationship with the state itself and with state or national churches.

One such challenge, featured before in publications from IBTS – for example in I. M. Randall, ed., *Baptists and the Orthodox Church: On the way to understanding* (Prague: IBTS, 2003) – is how to engage with Christian cultures that have been shaped predominantly by the Orthodox Church, where an understanding of the historical relationship between Baptists and Orthodox tradition is essential. The article by IBTS MTh student, Theodore Oprenov, on Bulgaria shows the different interpretations put on a Baptist-Orthodox dispute in Bulgaria in the 1920s.

Finally, in ‘Art Across Contexts’, Matthew Spousta, also an IBTS MTh student, offers a creative investigation of his topic. This stimulating article, although it does not have such a clear focus on Baptist identity as the others, reminds us that in thinking about their identity Baptists should not be isolationist. To be communities of believers that are true to Baptist tradition, contemporary Baptists need to consider their responses to changes going on within the wider church and the surrounding culture.

The Revd Dr Ian M. Randall
Senior Research Fellow, IBTS

Faith-Baptism: The Key to an Evangelical Baptismal Sacramentalism¹

Introduction

George Beasley-Murray was the pre-eminent British Baptist New Testament scholar of the twentieth century and most Baptists would say that his contribution to the study of baptism is his most important scholarly work. His classic² Whitley Lectures of 1959–60, published as *Baptism in the New Testament*, continues in print even after forty years. However, the irony is that one of the historians of Baptist theology has remarked that while Beasley-Murray and R. E. O. White³ “produced what are without doubt the most important, detailed and eloquent examinations of baptism”, nevertheless “their impact has been limited”. The reason for this, he suggests, is because “much of what they said has either not been read by many Baptists..., or have been read but not understood, or have been read but ignored”.⁴ This is a sad indictment on Baptists who take their name from the rite of Christian initiation. Many times throughout his writings Beasley-Murray refers to Baptist criticisms of other traditions whose baptismal theology does not accord with New Testament teaching, then notes that doing such a thing carries with it the requirement that Baptists themselves also test their beliefs and practices according to the word of God. For instance:

have not we Baptists a duty to set our own house in order? For too long we have regarded it as our vocation to demonstrate *who* are the proper recipients of baptism, but have been unable to supply a coherent account from the Scriptures of *what* that baptism is that must be administered to the right persons. Anyone acquainted with

¹ This paper was ‘The Second Dr G.R. Beasley-Murray Memorial Lecture’, sponsored by Spurgeon’s College, London, and presented at the Baptist Assembly, 4 May 2003. As such, it has been my deliberate policy to try and allow Beasley-Murray to speak for himself. I have striven to expound his baptismal theology and to keep critical interaction with him to a minimum. Also, due to constraints of time and space, I have only referred to a limited number of Beasley-Murray’s many writings on baptism and related subjects. I hope to return to this subject more fully in future. I am grateful to the Principal, the Revd Dr Nigel G. Wright for inviting me to present this lecture and for permission to use it here.

² E.g. W. Hulitt Gloer, ‘Editor’s Preface’, in W. Hulitt Gloer (ed.), *Eschatology and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of George Raymond Beasley-Murray* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), p. ix; also R. Alan Culpepper, ‘George R. Beasley-Murray’, in Timothy George and David S. Dockery (eds), *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1990), pp. 567–87 (p. 576), who describes it as “the definitive work on the subject for years to come”.

³ E.g. R.E.O. White, *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1960).

⁴ Anthony R. Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 3 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), pp. 227–28 n. 61.

our churches knows that there exist in them traditions as stereotyped as can be found in any other churches, and we are dangerously near to mistaking our own popular traditions for the Word of God as are the rest. We Baptists pride ourselves on being churches of the New Testament. It behooves us to take our own medicine – to cast aside our pride, search afresh the Scriptures, submit ourselves to their teaching, and be prepared for reform according to the Word.⁵

The issues

The issues at stake are highlighted in two short essays. The first was a response to Louis Read's short discussion of 'The Ordinances'. Here, Read rejects the use of the term 'sacraments' understood as 'means of grace' on the grounds that it has no meaning pertinent to the Baptist view of baptism and the Lord's Supper. "[A]s things are", he declares, the term "generally conveys a meaning alien to our thought" or "so nebulous to mean nothing". He then objects to the notion that sacraments are means of grace, "imparting benefit to those who participate". Instead, he argues that 'ordinance' lacks the ambiguity of 'sacrament' and is self-explanatory, implying the institution of both ordinances by Christ and this alone is "sufficient reason for continuing their observance".⁶ For Read and the majority of Baptists — both then and now — the purpose and meaning of the ordinances are that in them believers dedicate themselves to the Lord, being responses to God's goodness, portraying the means of redemption and evoking praise and worship.⁷

Beasley-Murray responded in 'The Sacraments'. His aim is not to defend the use of the term 'sacrament', though he remarks that the loose employment of it is inadequate reason to reject it. But his most severe criticism of Read is that in a discussion of the sacraments "a fellow-Baptist...should write with scarcely a reference to the Scriptures". No less than Paedobaptists, Baptists need to "turn again to the documents of our Faith" in order to ensure that they also do not build "on the sands of tradition". He outlines the accepted Baptist position at the time which, to our discredit, has barely changed in over fifty years: "the general emphasis amongst us falls on [baptism's] value as a means of confession and that other significations are subordinated to this main idea. It is normally held to

⁵ G.R. Beasley-Murray, 'Baptism in the New Testament', *Foundations* 3 (January, 1960), pp. 15-30 (p. 30).

⁶ L.A. Read, 'The Ordinances', *The Fraternal* 67 (January, 1948), pp. 8-10 (pp. 8-9).

⁷ Read, 'Ordinances', p. 10.

make no difference to the condition of the baptized person; its virtue lies in the expression of spiritual realities already appropriated. Such a view accords with that of [Read]...: Baptism is our act for God, our response to His appeal for obedience.” Beasley-Murray does *not* deny the confessional nature of baptism, and it is important that this is not forgotten. However, in this article and his other writings, he stresses that “the confessional value of Baptism...is a secondary, not primary, meaning of the rite”, and that the additional conclusion (namely, ‘Baptism is our act for God, our response to His appeal for obedience’) “is a pure rationalisation” which is “impossible to square with the New Testament expositions of the matter”. He then summarises the New Testament teaching as follows: “In every explicit mention of Baptism it is regarded as the supreme moment of our union with Christ in His redemptive acts for us and our consequent reception of the life of the Spirit”.⁸

Following his brief review of New Testament teaching, Beasley-Murray asks: “If this be valid exegesis, how can one assert that the important thing in Baptism is what we give to God?” He then comments that objections to a biblical sacramentalism “are usually on other than exegetical grounds”. Free Church people, he notes, are disinclined to hold such a view because it appears to contradict the deeply held conviction that people are “renewed in spirit and made heir of salvation on the exercise of faith”. It also appears to make baptism “operative instead of symbolic of a crisis already accomplished in the believer”, for it “postpones the operation and gift of the Spirit from the submission of faith to the reception of an outward ordinance”. And this is precisely Beasley-Murray’s point. The key to the problem is ‘postpone’ for “the New Testament knows nothing of postponing a baptism after conversion”. This, we will see, is key to Beasley-Murray’s argument, that baptism is conversion-baptism.⁹ In the primitive church conversion and baptism were “so indissolubly linked together that they may be regarded as a unity. In such a context”, he continues, “to speak of a Christian dying and rising with Christ and receiving the Spirit of Pentecost in baptism is no magical concept, for the submission of the rite *was* the occasion of surrender to Christ. This is no

⁸ G.R. Beasley-Murray, ‘The Sacraments’, *The Fraternal* 70 (October, 1948), pp. 3-7 (p. 3).

⁹ E.g., and anticipating our discussion below, see G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Worship and the Sacraments* (The Second Holdsworth-Grigg Memorial Lecture; Melbourne: Whitley College, the Baptist College of Victoria, 1970), n.p., but pp. 5-6: “The descriptions of baptism in the New Testament, and the indications of the apostolic teaching on its meaning, make it plain that the early Church viewed baptism as the completion of conversion to God. The baptism of John the Baptist is described by Mark as a ‘repentance baptism’ (Mark 1:4), and scholars are agreed that in this context repentance means ‘turning to God’; i.e. what we mean by conversion. This way of viewing baptism became normative in the Christian church, whatever else was attached to the significance of the rite.” (cf. Acts 2.37-38; 22.16 and 1 Pet. 3.21).

setting of a sacrament over against repentance and faith, as though Baptism made conversion unnecessary, but the intertwining of the two so that baptism is a part of conversion. It is only when the primitive relationship is separated that sacerdotalism creeps in and *opus operatum* becomes the watchword instead of the New Testament principle *nullum sacramentum sine fide*.”¹⁰

But Baptists have departed from New Testament baptism and in so doing “have overlooked the fact that they have been almost as culpable as others in breaking asunder the unity of conversion and baptism”.¹¹ What he means here we can put thus: while Paedobaptists have put baptism before conversion, Baptists have put it after it, sometimes by many years, even decades. Beasley-Murray continues: “Baptists are still not used to the fact that in the New Testament *kerygma* precedes *didache*, preaching precedes teaching”¹² and, though he does not make this explicit at this point, we should note that this is the order in which they appear in Mt. 28.19. He then states that “[i]f under modern conditions we fear to baptize converts straightaway, then let us recognise that in so doing *we have changed the nature of baptism*”. So in place of this Baptist tradition of baptism, Beasley-Murray challenged the Baptists of his time, and since little if anything in general has changed, then us too: “let baptism once more be regarded as part of conversion, the moment of supreme surrender rather than the expression of a believer’s obedience, and we shall be free once more to teach the New Testament doctrine of Baptism”.¹³

The second essay by Beasley-Murray is a brief exegetical study of ‘Baptism in the Epistles of Paul’ which appeared in the 1959 volume, *Christian Baptism*, a collaborative work by some of the leading British Baptist scholars of the next two generations.¹⁴ Edited by Alec Gilmore, *Christian Baptism* proved to be the most controversial work on baptism by any Baptists in the twentieth century¹⁵ coming under a sustained attack from anti-sacramentalists.¹⁶ Within a very short time the volume was

¹⁰ ‘The Sacraments’, p. 4, italics added.

¹¹ ‘The Sacraments’, p. 4.

¹² ‘The Sacraments’, p. 5.

¹³ ‘The Sacraments’, p. 5, italics added.

¹⁴ G.R. Beasley-Murray, ‘Baptism in the Epistles of Paul’, in Alec Gilmore (ed.), *Christian Baptism: A Fresh Attempt to Understand the Rite in terms of Scripture, History, and Theology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959), pp. 128-49. On the posts the ten contributors were to hold, see Cross, *Baptism*, p. 197 n. 55.

¹⁵ So Cross, *Baptism*, p. 228; Paul Beasley-Murray, *Fearless for Truth: A Personal Portrait of the Life of George Beasley-Murray* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), pp. 122-23, and the whole of his discussion of baptism, pp. 120-28.

¹⁶ For details of this controversy see Stanley K. Fowler, ‘Is “Baptist Sacramentalism” an Oxymoron?: Reactions in Britain to *Christian Baptism* (1959)’, in Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (eds),

denounced as unbiblical and unBaptist and it was Beasley-Murray who sought to answer the book's critics. One point needs to be noted: Beasley-Murray stated that the particular exegetical discussions under suspicion¹⁷ related "to *baptism in the apostolic Church*, not to baptism in the average modern Baptist church. Where baptism is sundered from conversion on the one hand, and from entry into the Church on the other, this language cannot be applied to it; such a baptism is a reduced baptism... My concern, along with my colleagues, is to put before Baptists the picture of ideal baptism, as it is portrayed in the apostolic writings, in the hope that we may strive to recover it or get somewhere near it. To insist on keeping our impoverished version of baptism would be a tragedy among a people who pride themselves on being the people of the New Testament."¹⁸

The meaning of 'sacrament'

Since the mid-nineteenth century Baptist understanding of the term 'sacrament' has been clouded by an antipathy towards the type of sacramentalism characterised by the Oxford Movement, whether in terms of the phrases 'baptismal regeneration' or the ancient formula *ex opere operato* with its connotation of magical efficacy. But what the overwhelming majority of Baptists were, and still are, unaware of, Beasley-Murray included,¹⁹ is that many early Baptists did understand baptism and the Lord's Supper sacramentally.²⁰ It was only during the nineteenth century that this term became widely derided and rejected, used only by a small minority of Baptists.²¹ Further, many Baptists were, and continue to be, seemingly unaware that there is no agreed definition of the term

Baptist Sacramentalism, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 5 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), pp. 129-50, and his *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 2 (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), pp. 113-33; and Cross, *Baptism*, pp. 196-97, 227-39.

¹⁷ R.E.O. White on 'The Baptism of Jesus' and 'Baptism in the Synoptic Gospels', pp. 84-98 and 98-115; S.I. Buse on 'Baptism in the Acts of the Apostles' and 'Baptism in Other New Testament Writings', pp. 115-128 and 170-86; and D.R. Griffiths on 'Baptism in the Fourth Gospel and the First Epistle of John', pp. 149-70.

¹⁸ So G.R. Beasley-Murray, 'Baptism Controversy – "The Spirit is There"', *Baptist Times*, 10 December 1959, p. 8.

¹⁹ Fowler, 'Is "Baptist Sacramentalism" an Oxymoron?', pp. 146-47.

²⁰ See Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, pp. 10-88; Philip E. Thompson, 'A New Question in Baptist History: Seeking a Catholic Spirit among Early Baptists', *Pro Ecclesia* 8.1 (Winter, 1999), pp. 51-72 (pp. 66-68, 71-72), and 'Practicing the Freedom of God: Formation in Early Baptist Life', in David M. Hammond (ed.), *Theology and Lived Christianity* (The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society, 45; Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2000), pp. 119-38 (pp. 126-31); and Cross, *Baptism*, pp. 6-17, and 'Dispelling the Myth of English Baptist Baptismal Sacramentalism', *Baptist Quarterly* 38.8 (October, 2000), pp. 367-91.

²¹ Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, pp. 86-88; and Cross, *Baptism*, pp. 16-17.

‘sacrament’.²² ‘Sacrament’ is a term that has to be defined by the writer using it, not read into it by the reader. Here, authorial intention is what is important. That this did not happen can be seen in the controversy surrounding *Christian Baptism* when anti-sacramentalists repeatedly claimed that Beasley-Murray in particular was using the term in a way in which he, in fact, was not using it.²³

Beasley-Murray is fully aware that “the term ‘sacrament’ has... varied meanings attributed to it”,²⁴ and it is significant to note that nowhere does he formally define it. Instead he lets the New Testament teaching of baptism — as both a divine and human action — give the term its meaning.²⁵

The only definitions of ‘sacrament’ he favours are a ‘means of grace’ and *sacramentum*, both of which he regards as in accord with New Testament teaching. By ‘means of grace’ he means more than is usually meant, because “[i]n the Church of the Apostles (please note the limitation) the whole height and depth of grace is bound up with the experience of baptism. For to the New Testament writers baptism was nothing less than ‘the climax of God’s dealing with the penitent seeker and of the convert’s return to God’.”²⁶ A sacrament is “the Word of God in action” which “must be responded to in the act of participating”.

He finds the idea of Peter’s use of ‘appeal’ or ‘pledge’ in 1 Pet. 3.21 as a declaration of faith and loyalty to God as not far removed from the use of the term *sacramentum*, the military oath. For in baptism “the convert is enrolled in the army of the Lord, and baptism makes his pledge of obedience to God”. He further notes that the early church’s creeds developed from the earliest baptismal confession, ‘Jesus is Lord’ (Rom. 10.9), and were confessions used by converts as they made their surrender

²² E.g., the patristic scholar J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A & C Black, 5th edn, 1977), p. 423, notes that in the fourth and fifth centuries “the conception of sacrament was still elastic”. This is equally the case today.

²³ See the discussion in Fowler, ‘Is “Baptist Sacramentalism” an Oxymoron?’, pp. 141-42 and 147-50, and *More Than a Symbol*, pp. 125-26 and 129-33; and Cross, *Baptism*, pp. 230-39.

²⁴ G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (London: Macmillan/New York: St Martin’s Press, 1966), p. 13. In *Worship and the Sacraments*, p. 5, he speaks in terms of the ambiguity of ‘sacraments’, adding, “but my use of the term is intended to convey the simple thought that God has given us sacraments to be employed in the context of worship”.

²⁵ That baptism is a divine and human act where the gospel meets faith is repeatedly emphasised by Beasley-Murray. See, e.g., *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 43, 66; also his ‘Baptism and the Sacramental View’, *Baptist Times*, 11 February 1960, pp. 9-10 (p. 9), where, on the basis of baptism in the New Testament being inseparable from turning to God in faith, he states that “a sacrament can be a genuine interchange between God and man”; and ‘The Authority and Justification for Believers’ Baptism’, *Review and Expositor* 77.1 (Winter, 1980), pp. 63-70 (p. 66).

²⁶ ‘The Spirit is There’, p. 8, italics his.

to the Redeemer-Lord.²⁷

The suggestion that a biblically-based sacramentalism leaves the door open to an automatic, *ex opere operato* understanding of baptism, Beasley-Murray states is ruled out on the basis of Col. 2.12 and 1 Pet. 3.21. In the former is to be found the phrase “in baptism you were also raised to life with him through your faith in the active power of God”, while the latter states that “Baptism...now saves you, *not* as a removal of dirt from the body, *but* as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, *through* the resurrection of Jesus Christ”.²⁸

Baptism as a symbol

It is important to recognise that Beasley-Murray nowhere dismisses or diminishes the importance of the symbolic nature of baptism. What he wants to do is avoid, on the one hand, the merely symbolic interpretation so characteristic of Baptists, especially since the mid-nineteenth century, and, on the other hand, a magical understanding of the rite. The strength of the symbolic dimension, he acknowledges, lies in immersion that symbolises, in a way pouring or sprinkling cannot, the most obvious element of baptismal symbolism, namely the cleansing of sin (Acts 22.16). The stripping off and putting on of clothes symbolises the discarding of the old life apart from God and putting on the new life in Christ (Gal. 3.27; Col. 3.9, 12). The act of immersion beneath the water and then the rising out of it is peculiarly appropriate to an action which derives its meaning from identification with Christ who died, was buried and rose again for humanity’s salvation. But what he is emphatic about is that it is not enough for the non-sacramentalist to say that what happened to the person so-baptized was that they received the blessing God always gives to the obedience of faith, and the reason for this he states unequivocally — it is because this is not what the New Testament says happens in baptism.²⁹ Elsewhere he writes: “[Baptism] signifies abandonment of reliance on self for faith in God, the radical turning from sin to God known as repentance, a dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ, a forsaking of life according to this age for life in the fellowship of the Church, the Body of Christ.”³⁰ Quite simply, “to conclude that the understanding of baptism as ‘a beautiful

²⁷ *Worship and the Sacraments*, p. 6. See also *Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 127-28.

²⁸ ‘Authority and Justification’, pp. 63-70 (pp. 64-65). Cf. his, ‘The Second Chapter of Colossians’, *Review and Expositor* 70 (1973), pp. 469-79 (pp. 476-77). In *Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 21-22, he cites 1 Cor. 10.1-4 along with 1 Pet. 3.21 as warning against a magical-superstitious view of the sacraments.

²⁹ See *Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 23-27.

³⁰ *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 167.

and expressive symbol', *and nothing more*, is irreconcilable with the New Testament".³¹ Further, when baptism is viewed as nothing more than a symbol, the emphasis being on the obedience and witness expressed in it, the result is "the carrying out of a rite with virtually no content — and what is that but ritualism?"³²

The New Testament's baptismal sacramentalism: faith-baptism³³

The whole question of the nature of baptism, Beasley-Murray states, "can hardly be answered without reference to the New Testament teaching on baptism", and, as we have seen, his criticisms of the non-sacramentalist position are based on the inadequacy of its exegesis of the New Testament.³⁴ As we have already noted, his sacramentalism is 'defined' exegetically and exegesis forms the major part of his writings on baptism.

Throughout their history Baptists have understood the authority for believer's baptism to lie in the commission of the risen Lord in Mt. 28.19. Here the making of disciples involves the proclamation of the gospel which includes an appeal for repentance (understood as turning to God³⁵) and faith, and that those who receive the word with faith are to be baptized and taught the fuller elements of Christian doctrine and living. But Beasley-Murray notes that this frequent understanding of Jesus' command in terms of making disciples "*by baptizing them*" can be accepted only on the basis of the recognition that it is those who acknowledge Jesus as Lord in the Trinity; i.e. on confession of faith in response to the hearing of the gospel, who become 'disciples' in baptism.

This understanding of the Great Commission is supported by the earliest accounts of the church's mission in the book of Acts. Here the apostolic proclamation of the gospel, the hearing with faith and baptism are constantly linked (Acts 2.37-38; 2.41; 8.31; 8.35-36; 16.14-15; 16.32-33; 18.8; 19.50). But more important than these historical discussions is the nature of baptism itself as expounded throughout the New Testament,

³¹ *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 32, italics his.

³² *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 85.

³³ Beasley-Murray's views are discussed at length and set within a discussion of more recent studies of the sacramental nature of baptism in Anthony R. Cross, 'Being Open to God's Sacramental Work: A Study in Baptism', in Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross (eds), *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), pp. 355-77 (pp. 360-68).

³⁴ *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 13.

³⁵ G.R. Beasley-Murray, 'Faith in the New Testament: A Baptist Perspective', *American Baptist Quarterly* 1.2 (December, 1982), pp. 137-43 (p. 137): "The noun *metanoia* (Hebrew *teshubah*) is the equivalent of conversion."

particularly the letters. In passages such as Gal. 3.26-27, Rom. 6.1-11, Col. 2.12 and 1 Pet. 3.21.

He remarks that it is significant that passages in the New Testament that provide some of the most important insights into the meaning of baptism “conjoin faith and baptism, as though they were integral to each other”. This observation is the hub of the problem for Baptists: “baptism appears to be understood and expounded in such terms as make sense only in the case of baptism received with the response of faith to the Good News”.³⁶

Gal. 3.26-27 is of foundational importance because it signifies the fundamental element of baptism as relating to union with Christ: “In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For as many of you as were baptized to Christ have put on Christ”. Baptism here is said to mean ‘putting on’ Christ as one puts on a garment, and in Christ we share sonship to God through faith. “Self-evidently”, he comments, “one cannot be in Christ without sharing his sonship; which suggests that it is faith which receives Christ in baptism; accordingly it is the man exercising faith who is the object of the divine work in baptism.”³⁷ More simply: “in Paul’s view the experience of baptism and that of faith are one”.³⁸

Therefore, “if faith is to be taken seriously, so is baptism” and he rejects the tendency of many exegetes to “either exalt baptism at the expense of faith or faith at the expense of baptism”. This leads to the conclusion that

Baptism is the baptism of faith and grace, so that in it faith receives what grace gives. Above all grace gives Christ, for Christ is the fullness of grace; faith therefore receives Christ in baptism. If Paul were pressed to define the relationship of the two statements in vv.26-27, I cannot see how he could preserve the force of both sentences apart from affirming that baptism is the moment of faith in which the adoption is realized — in the dual sense of effected by God and grasped by man — which is the same as saying that in baptism faith receives Christ in whom the adoption is effected. The significance of baptism is the objective facts to which it witnesses, the historic event of redemption and the present gift that it makes possible, embraced through faith in that God who acted and yet acts. Through such an alliance of faith and baptism, Christianity is prevented from evaporating into an ethereal subjectivism on the

³⁶ ‘Authority and Justification’, p. 64.

³⁷ ‘Authority and Justification’, p. 64.

³⁸ ‘Faith in the New Testament’, p. 141.

one hand and from hardening into a fossilized objectivism on the other. The two aspects of Apostolic Christianity are preserved in *faith-baptism*.³⁹

While Rom. 6.1-11 “contains the profoundest treatment of baptism in the New Testament”⁴⁰ the nature of the relationship between faith and baptism is not Paul’s primary concern, which is, rather, the ethical aspect of baptism and how this enables him to counter the antinomian claim, “Let us carry on in sin that grace may abound” (Rom. 6.1).⁴¹ Beasley-Murray agrees with those scholars who believe that faith in God has to be presumed as the background of the whole passage from v. 2 onwards. And in view of Paul’s teaching elsewhere, in Romans and throughout his letters, this cannot be denied. In short: “This chapter has the convert in mind, and all that Paul says of baptism presumes a faith responsive to the grace of God operative in it.”⁴² Accordingly, “In [Paul’s] theology of baptism the divine action and human responsiveness are inseparable and enable baptism to be what it is.”⁴³

What is set out in Gal. 3.26-27 is even plainer in Col. 2.12, which Beasley-Murray sees as “an authentic commentary on Romans 6.3-4”.⁴⁴ This fusion of the objective and subjective elements in baptism is emphasised by the phrase “*in which you were raised through faith in the operation of God who raised him from the dead*”.⁴⁵ Beasley-Murray agrees with the RSV’s rendering of v. 12 that the antecedent of ‘in which’ (*en ho*) is ‘baptism’ and not ‘Christ’, thus giving the reading: “Buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God”.⁴⁶ This also brings the saying close to Gal. 3.26-27, “for as there, so here, faith is integrated into the baptismal event. *In baptism* the baptized is raised *through faith*. The divine and human aspects of the experience of salvation are accorded full recognition. Not that faith effects its own resurrection; faith rejoices in the grace revealed in Christ and directs itself wholly to the God whose almighty power raised Christ from the dead and raises helpless sinners.”⁴⁷ Paul’s train of thought is simple: “You were buried with [Christ] in baptism and you were raised with

³⁹ *Baptism*, p. 151, italics added.

⁴⁰ ‘Baptism in the Epistles of Paul’, p. 130.

⁴¹ *Baptism*, p. 143. Cf. ‘Baptism in the New Testament’, p. 26; ‘Faith in the New Testament’, p. 141; and ‘Authority and Justification’, p. 64.

⁴² ‘Baptism in the Epistles of Paul’, p. 134.

⁴³ *Baptism*, p. 145.

⁴⁴ E.g. *Baptism*, p. 155; ‘Authority and Justification’, p. 64.

⁴⁵ ‘Baptism in the Epistles of Paul’, 140.

⁴⁶ *Baptism*, pp. 153-54; ‘Second Chapter of Colossians’, p. 476; ‘Baptism in the New Testament’, p. 28.

⁴⁷ *Baptism*, p. 154.

[Christ] in baptism”, but it is important to note the significant addition: “raised with him in baptism *through faith in the working of God*”. The language here “presupposes faith as operative in baptism”, in fact, “from the human side, faith is viewed as the operative power of baptism”.⁴⁸ This interpretation of baptism is wholly in accord with Acts 2.38 where the turning to the Lord is expressed with and in baptism. Beasley-Murray states: “In such a setting baptism is less a testimony to a faith previously received than a declaration of a faith here and now embraced, an embodiment of conversion to Christ, and a submission to him who is able to save.”⁴⁹

Verse 12 makes clear the “vital part in baptism played by faith”. “[S]o important a function is ascribed to faith [in Col. 2.12], it is difficult to see how the experience described can be held to be present without the exercise of faith on the part of the baptized.”

A similar understanding of baptism is to be found in 1 Pet. 3.21: “Baptism... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”. Here the essential feature of baptism is not the washing of the body but the spiritual transaction in which the baptized makes appeal to God in faith and prayer and experiences the power of the risen Lord to save.⁵⁰ Beasley-Murray’s conclusion to his study of this verse is worth quoting in full as the climax of his exegetical study.

The chief lesson of this passage is its emphatic denial that the external elements of baptism constitute either its essence or its power. The cleansing in baptism is gained not through the application of water to the flesh but through the pledge of faith and obedience therein given to God, upon which the resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes a saving power to the individual concerned. Observe carefully: it is not said that the giving to God of an answer saves; the Risen Lord does that, ‘baptism saves...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ’. But the response is at the heart of the baptism wherein the Lord makes the resurrection effective.⁵¹

The combined weight of this exegetical study leads Beasley-Murray

⁴⁸ ‘Baptism in the New Testament’, p. 28.

⁴⁹ ‘Second Chapter of Colossians’, p. 476. Cf. *Worship and the Sacraments*, p. 6. *Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 48-49, he writes: “Faith is directed to the God who raised Christ from death and so enters into the power of the resurrection. Clearly baptism so interpreted is really conversion-baptism: the believer comes to God through the Christ of the cross and resurrection, and in the momentous beginning of communion in Christ he learns that to be reconciled through the blood of the cross is to be conformed to it and to rise with the Lord (Phil. iii.10).”

⁵⁰ ‘Authority and Justification’, p. 65.

⁵¹ *Baptism*, p. 262.

to conclude that “The inextricable link between Baptism and faith is observable not only in baptismal statements but in a comparison of these with the apostolic teaching about faith”. In short, “the New Testament writers associate the full range of salvation on the one hand with baptism and on the other hand with faith”. So, if any doubt remains that New Testament baptism is rightly understood as faith-baptism then this diagrammatic presentation will dispel it.

The gifts promised to faith and baptism

Gift of God	Faith	Baptism
Forgiveness	Rom. 4.5-7; 1 Jn 1.9	Acts 2.38; 22.16
Justification	Rom. 3–5 (e.g. 3.28); Gal. 2–3	1 Cor. 6.11
Union with Christ	Eph. 3.17	Gal. 3.27
Being crucified with Christ	Gal. 2.20	Rom. 6.2-11
Death and resurrection	Rom. 8.12-13	Rom. 6.2-11; Col. 2.12
Sonship	Jn 1.12	Gal. 3.26-27
Holy Spirit	Gal. 3.2-5 and 14	Acts 2.38; 1 Cor. 12.13
Entry into the Church	Acts 5.14; Gal. 3.6-7	Gal. 3.27; 1 Cor. 12.13
Regeneration and life	Jn 3.14-16; 20.31	Tit. 3.5; Jn 3.5
The kingdom and eternal life	Mk 10.15; Jn 3.14-16	1 Cor. 6.9-11
Salvation	Rom. 1.16; Jn 3.16	1 Pet. 3.21

Here we see that according to the New Testament the gifts of grace given to faith are virtually identical with those given in baptism.⁵² When the New Testament’s baptismal passages are closely examined “an extraordinary duality appears in the means whereby God imparts his saving grace”.⁵³ What we find is that the full range of salvation is promised to faith, but also that it is associated with baptism. Forgiveness is promised to faith in Rom. 4.5-7 and 1 Jn 1.9, but to baptism in Acts 2.38 and 22.16. In Rom. 3–5 and Gal. 2–3 justification is by faith alone, e.g., Rom. 3.28, but

⁵² This table is based on *Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 27-37; ‘Baptism in the New Testament’, p. 28; ‘Authority and Justification’, pp. 65-66.

⁵³ ‘Baptism in the New Testament’, p. 28.

in 1 Cor. 6.11 it is assigned to baptism. In Eph. 3.17 union with Christ is through faith, while in Gal. 3.27 it is rooted in baptism. In Gal. 2.20 being crucified with Christ is by faith alone, but in Rom. 6.2-11 it occurs in baptism. Sharing in Christ's death and resurrection is by faith in Rom. 8.12-13, but in Rom. 6.2-11 and Col. 2.12 it is in baptism. In Jn 1.12 sonship is promised to faith, but in Gal. 3.26-27 it is related to faith and baptism. In Gal. 3.2-5 and 14 the Spirit is given to faith, but in Acts 2.38 and 1 Cor. 12.13 to baptism. Entry into the church, is by faith in Acts 5.14 and Gal. 3.6-7, but in baptism according to Gal. 3.27 and 1 Cor. 12.13. Regeneration and life are granted to faith in Jn 3.14-16 and 20.31, but to baptism in Tit. 3.5 and Jn 3.5. The kingdom and eternal life are promised to faith in Mk 10.15 and Jn 3.14-16, yet in 1 Cor. 6.9-11 it is given to those who have abandoned the sins that exclude from it, for they have been washed clean in baptism, something also seen in Acts 22.16. Finally, salvation is given to faith in Rom. 1.16 and Jn 3.16, but to baptism in 1 Pet. 3.21.

It is clear, therefore, that God's gift to baptism and faith is one, namely, salvation in Christ. "There is no question of his giving one part in baptism and another to faith, whether in that order or in the reverse. He gives *all* in baptism and *all* to faith... God's gracious giving to faith belongs to the context of baptism, even as God's gracious giving in baptism is to faith. Faith has no merit to claim such gifts and baptism has no power to produce them. It is all of God, who brings a man to faith and to baptism and has been pleased so to order his giving." This New Testament theology of baptism is based on the axiom that baptism is administered to converts. "It is regarded as equally axiomatic that conversion and baptism are inseparable, if not indistinguishable" because "[i]n the primitive apostolic Church baptism was conversion-baptism."⁵⁴ This can all be summarised as follows: "If God gives his gracious gifts to faith *and* baptism, he gives them in association, *i.e.* he gives them to faith *in* baptism, or (which amounts to

⁵⁴ *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 37; cf. pp. 93, 135. See also, e.g., 'Holy Spirit, Baptism, and the Body of Christ', *Review and Expositor* 63 (1966), pp. 177-85 (pp. 180-81, 185); 'Second Chapter of Colossians', p. 476. In this he anticipates what has become termed 'conversion-initiation' by James D.G. Dunn, *Baptism and the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (London: SCM Press, 1970), pp. 4-7. For the widespread acceptance of this term for becoming a Christian, see Anthony R. Cross, "'One Baptism' (Ephesians 4.5): A Challenge to the Church", in Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross (eds), *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church: Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R.E.O. White*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series*, 171 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 173-209 (pp. 173-77).

the same thing) to baptism *in faith*.”⁵⁵ In the New Testament baptism was never conceived of apart from the faith that turns to God for salvation and any interpretation of baptism that diminishes “the crucial significance of faith is unfaithful to the apostolic gospel”.⁵⁶

Baptismal reform

So how does Beasley-Murray suggest Baptists reform their theology and practice of baptism according to the word of God?

First, “there ought to be a greater endeavour to make baptism integral to *the Gospel*”. This is seen in Acts 2.38’s “Repent and *be baptized!*” Faith was presumed in repentance, but Peter’s answer told the crowd how to become Christians: “faith and repentance are to be expressed in baptism, and *so* they are to come to the Lord. Baptism is here a part of the proclamation of Christ... An effort ought to be made to restore this note in our preaching.”⁵⁷ Baptism is also the proper subject for exposition in enquirer’s classes. In short, we need to “recover the apostolic concept of conversion-baptism”.⁵⁸

Secondly, and following on from the first point, “there should be a serious endeavour to make baptism integral to *conversion*... The preaching of the Gospel is directed to the conversion of men and women” and this involves “not simply the acceptance of an idea but a reception and submission in action. Baptism and conversion are thus inseparables; the one demands the other, for neither is complete without the other.”

Many will object that baptism needs to be postponed so that a candidate’s fitness for baptism can be ascertained. But we must recall Beasley-Murray’s comments that when we do so we in fact alter New Testament baptism. He does not diminish the importance of instruction, which he sees as “always necessary”, but notes that it “need not wholly precede baptism” for “much of it can more fittingly come after baptism”, adding, “and in any case the instruction ought *never* to cease at baptism”. If what he has already said were carried out “and the nature and significance of baptism were given their rightful place in the proclamation of the Gospel, hearers would understand what baptism is and that the response of

⁵⁵ ‘Baptism in the New Testament’, p. 28. Also, *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 127: “the New Testament utterances about baptism take it as axiomatic that faith is not merely an accompaniment of baptism but an inherent element of it”.

⁵⁶ ‘Baptism in the New Testament’, p. 29.

⁵⁷ *Baptism*, p. 393.

⁵⁸ ‘Holy Spirit, Baptism, and the Body of Christ’, p. 185. Cf. also *Worship and the Sacraments*, p. 7.

faith should find its fitting embodiment in the sacrament. Above all, whether the time between baptism and conversion be little or much, baptism should be regarded as the ultimate and unreserved ratification of the individual's turning to God and of God's gracious turning to the individual, with all that means of dedication on the one hand and of grace on the other."⁵⁹

Thirdly, following on from his belief that the "deeply significant elements in the meaning of baptism should find expression in the baptismal service" and baptismal preparation, the believer should see their baptism as the instrument of their surrender to the Lord and the assurance of their acceptance by God in Christ. "The baptism should therefore be an act of believing prayer", as Jesus prayed at his baptism. This "is naturally bound up with the element of confession in baptism — confession to the Lord and to the congregation". As a minimum, this could be done by means of the opportunity of question and answer, but, where possible, by a brief testimony before the congregation.⁶⁰

Finally, he believes that we should strive to make baptism integral to church membership, observing that "our baptismal practice has tended to obscure the fact that New Testament baptism is at once to Christ and the Body". This is most easily done by means of a service of baptism, concluded with the Lord's Supper in which the newly baptized is welcomed into the church and partakes of their first communion. To this he adds the desirability of including the laying on of hands as an integral part of the service, underscoring "the aspect of baptismal symbolism as initiation into Christ and the Church by the Spirit".⁶¹

This said, Beasley-Murray was aware of the present confusion over baptism which has resulted in there being two forms of the rite — believer's and infant baptism.⁶² To this end he favours open membership "solely for *members of other Churches* transferring into a Baptist Church",⁶³ but "young people confessing their faith and converts from

⁵⁹ *Baptism*, pp. 393-94.

⁶⁰ *Worship and the Sacraments*, p. 7.

⁶¹ *Baptism*, pp. 394-95. Cf. also *Worship and the Sacraments*, p. 7.

⁶² *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 158.

⁶³ Cf. *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 86: "While convinced that the baptism of believers only is scriptural, Baptists know full well that most Christians have not received baptism in this manner; in open membership churches, therefore, a welcome is given to Christians from other denominations, without insisting on their receiving baptism as believers." Elsewhere, *Baptism*, p. 392, he maintains that Baptists could make "a significant step towards the establishing of closer relations with other Churches", for "in respect for the conscience of our fellow-Christians and the like charity, which we trust will be exercised towards us, could we not refrain from requesting the baptism of those baptized in infancy who wish to join our churches and administer baptism to such only where there is a strong plea for it from the

without should never question the need for baptism; they should refrain from both Church membership and participating in the communion service until they have submitted to baptism”.⁶⁴

Conclusion

As we have already had cause to note, Baptists have been quick to draw attention to the weakness of purported biblical precedents for infant baptism, but there is the flip side of this from which Baptists must not shrink. “The Baptist demand that other denominations face the teaching of the New Testament dispassionately, with a willingness not to be chained to the traditions of earlier generations, and for reform according to the Word of God naturally entails as a corollary a readiness that they take the same medicine and face the teaching of the Scriptures, with a willingness to reform their own ways in accordance with that same Word of God.”⁶⁵ This, I believe, we have singularly failed to do. We have not tested our baptismal beliefs and practices against the bar of scripture and neither have we taken much notice of our leading scholars who have spent so much of their academic calling studying God’s word, listening to God’s people — of whatever tradition — and providing us with rich fare of which we have barely partaken. If this lecture in honour of one of our greatest biblical scholars goes some way to whet our appetite to return again to God’s word then we will be greatly helped to a deeper appreciation of the fulness of the gospel to which we are called to be witnesses. We are all familiar with the fact that we live in a post-Christian culture and as we continue to proclaim the good news of salvation through the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ we must not ignore the fact that the call is still that proclaimed by Peter on the Day of Pentecost: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2.38, NRSV).

The importance of all this for today’s Church, I believe, comes out strongly in one of Beasley-Murray’s concluding remarks in *Baptism Today and Tomorrow*:

The world is ignorant of the Gospel. The Church therefore is universally on mission, or ought to be. Its proclamation of the

applicant? This would leave room for freedom of conscience for those who believe they should be baptized, despite their having received infant baptism, but it would involve a change of policy with respect to the majority who come to us from other Denominations.”

⁶⁴ *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 88.

⁶⁵ *Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 15-16. See also *Baptism*, pp. 393-95.

Gospel will be far more effective if its baptismal practice is reformed according to the New Testament pattern. In that setting baptism is the conclusion of Gospel proclamation. Any move to rehabilitate that relationship is to be welcomed.⁶⁶

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⁶⁶ *Today and Tomorrow*, p. 171.

Disestablishment – Loss for the Church or the Country?

A Dissenting Perspective¹

Should travellers pass from Continental Europe into England, some distinctive architectural features might swiftly strike them. Chief among these is the number and variety of ecclesiastical buildings they might see. Perhaps every village in Europe has a church building and every town several, serving the various parishes within its boundaries. This reflects the incontestable historical fact that Christianity is the formative religion of the European peoples. But in Continental Europe many villages have only one building representing one dominant church tradition. England, by contrast, is notable for the sheer number and variety of church buildings that might be found even in the smallest villages. English history is a story of church and chapel. Parish churches there will certainly be in abundance and they are among the joys of our heritage, as even ardent atheists might admit.

But look more closely and observant travellers will find more: ancient and simple chapels belonging to the traditions of so-called Old Dissent, the Baptists, the Congregationalists, the Presbyterians; Quaker meeting houses; Methodist chapels originating in the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival or reflecting the multiple denominations into which Methodism later fragmented before partially re-uniting in the twentieth century; Unitarian chapels reflecting the religious rationalism of the Enlightenment; Salvation Army citadels and Gospel Halls for the Exclusive or Open Brethren; Pentecostal tabernacles of Apostolic, Elim or Assemblies of God kind. Then there are the newer movements: the bold and confident worship centres of the numerous African or Afro-Caribbean churches, some proudly traditional, others stunningly entrepreneurial; the hi-tech Christian centres of the so-called new-churches; and, of course, the community halls, schools and public buildings which, certainly in London, are home to congregations which cannot afford premises of their own or choose to forego them. Behind this immense variety lies the long and sometimes conflict-ridden history of religious debate and disagreement which has formed the English and their society in large measure into what it now is.

¹ This was a lecture delivered as part of the Liddon Lectures, 2003, at St Mary-le-Strand Church, London. The Liddon Lectures were instituted in memory of the Anglo-Catholic, H. P. Liddon, Canon of St Paul's Cathedral and a popular Victorian preacher.

There is one meaning of the word ‘establishment’ that we might quickly agree on: the Christian faith has been and, if the last census is to be believed, continues to be the established religion of the English people whether its form be Anglican, Roman or Free Church.² Talk of ‘multi-faith’ Britain should be undertaken with some degree of care. But of course the way I use ‘established’ here is particular. Considerations of the precise relation of Church and state aside, it is a matter of fact that the English are a product not least of the Christian faith that has inhabited England since Roman times. The English Church³ is the oldest of all English institutions. Yet England has been a hotbed of religious contest as competing versions of what it means to be faithfully Christian and faithfully church have struggled with each other and, in the process, shaped and modified each other and their environment.

This lecture concerns a Dissenting perspective on the issue of Establishment. I have already made clear one use of the word establishment which no Dissenter would find particularly problematic: Christianity as the historically formative religion of European history. However, Dissenters and Nonconformists are those who have refused to accept the discipline of the Church of England and have, for reasons of conscience, refused to conform to its worship and prescriptions. In speaking of a Dissenting perspective, this lecture is bound to deal with historical matters and to give some interpretation of them. It will then venture some opinions, informed by that interpretation, about our contemporary reality. So, having described and interpreted, my primary concern must then be to relate the insights of this tradition to the world in which we live and especially to ask whether disestablishment would leave church or country any the poorer.

The terms ‘Dissenter’ or ‘Nonconformist’ have a peculiarly English character to them. They also sound dated and perhaps irrelevant. Indeed, Dissenters and Nonconformists have felt this themselves since at least the nineteenth century when they began, for preference, to define their convictions as ‘Free Church’. Dissent and Nonconformity were negative terms, concepts which allowed that against which they were a protest to define what they were. ‘Free Church’, by contrast, was an attempt at positive self-definition: the church of Jesus Christ was to be free, most especially in that it was founded upon free profession of faith and that it

² Hereafter, when this word is used with an initial capital it refers to formal Establishment as part of the constitution. Otherwise, it refers to the Christian faith as an established part of social existence even if this is not as part of the constitution.

³ The word ‘church’ is used so variously in this paper that for the sake of clarity, and contrary to common usage, I use it without a capital when it refers to the universal community or the local congregation. With an initial capital it refers either to the Established Church or, as here, is part of a proper noun or title.

was free to govern itself under Christ who alone is supreme governor and head of the church. This conviction is grounded in what are sometimes called ‘the crown rights of the Redeemer’: Christ alone has the right to rule and no human being can usurp this right. As the church is called to be free, so also it seeks its own image in civil society by derivation: society is to be free, free from religious compulsion, discrimination and penalty; free for the exercise of the informed conscience; free also from dictatorship and domination. A ‘free church in a free state’ encapsulates the essence of the Free Church vision as it did that of various political movements of the nineteenth century.⁴

If the term ‘Free Church’ brings us close to the essence or genius of this tradition, the words Dissent and Nonconformity help to trace the historical route that led to it. These words refer to the particular experiences of some Christians within the English context. Their experience is no doubt paralleled in other places and its memory has certainly been exported from its English home to those parts of the world, especially English-speaking, which have been some kind of continuation of the story. Particular historical events, specifically the journey from persecution to toleration within newly Protestant England, have been uniquely formative for the tradition.

The historian John Coffey has traced this transition in some detail.⁵ In the Elizabethan age religious *uniformity* was considered an essential good for the preservation of English religious, national and political identity. Within this there was a close interweaving of religious and political concerns. Those who would threaten uniformity either by attempting to return to Roman Catholicism or by moving towards radical Puritanism were severely dealt with. Failure to conform to the practices of the Church of England and non-attendance at or departure from its liturgies, were penalised. The use of coercive measures to preserve Christendom had long been practised with the approval of the Church and had been given powerful theological justification by St Augustine. It came to be taken as the norm. The peace of the world, that is to say its power to coerce in order to preserve peace, was rightly if reluctantly to be used by the authorities to

⁴ The ‘free church in a free state’ formula used by advocates of the separation of church and state is attributed to Camillo Cavour (1810-61), Piedmontese statesman and first prime minister of a united Italy. He saw the liberty of the Roman Catholic Church that would result from its separation from the Italian state as the means of the world’s renewal and the revival of humankind: *Encyclopaedia Britannica; Micropaedia Volume 2* (Fifteenth Edition, Chicago: 1992), pp. 976-978. By contrast, Jürgen Moltmann attributes the term to his fellow-countryman Guiseppe Mazzini (1805-72): *The Spirit of Life: A universal affirmation* (London: SCM Press, 1992), p. 107.

⁵ J. Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England 1558-1689* (Edinburgh: Longman, 2000). John Coffey is an external examiner for Spurgeon’s College and IBTS.

preserve the peace of the church. Admittedly, this was emphatically seen by Augustine as a disciplinary rather than a punitive measure, but it came with time to be used as an instrument for rooting out those who were perceived as threats to religious uniformity and so to political well-being. Dissenters were harshly dealt with during the Reformation era and beyond. The high point of the attempt to achieve uniformity came after the restoration of the monarchy and the publication in 1662 of the Book of Common Prayer. After years of struggle and debate over the nature and direction of the English Church, years which included the political and religious conflicts of the English Civil War, a defining moment had arrived. Those who could not or would not submit to the Prayer Book's regulation were ejected from the Church and were known thereafter as Dissenters and Nonconformists. Even if the worst persecutions were brought to a close by the Act of Toleration in 1689, other penalties and exclusions were to remain in force for many years to come.

The cost of such coercion to social cohesion meant that uniformity was in time to prove impossible and indeed unfruitful to sustain over time, alienating as it did so many otherwise upright members of society. It gave way to the search first for *comprehension*, in which the Church of England might embrace a wider range of theological convictions, and then to *toleration* of those who excluded themselves from the Church's ministrations or for whom the Church could find no place within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. From the belief that uniformity was necessary to preserve the well-being of society, experience had led, with many fits and starts, to the contrary belief that toleration alone could achieve this.

English Dissent is the product of this historical experience and contributed significantly by its resilience to the emergence of toleration. There is a theory that we never forget anything that ever happens to us. If this is true on the corporate as well as the individual level then historical animosities have the capacity to shape present responses. For some contemporary Dissenters hostility to an Established Church is likely to emerge as a deeply felt resurgence of an historical memory of persecution. Even when an Established Church proclaims itself as a friend and guardian of religious freedom there is a deep current within Dissent that will view it as the remnant of a religio-political system that needs to be repented of and renounced as a clear sign that the Church has seen the error of its ways and is determined to put things right. Contemporary justifications of Establishment are seen negatively as self-serving attempts to hold on to

past privileges and position which should be exposed by means of the hermeneutic of suspicion.

However, at this point we need to muddy the waters somewhat. Nothing actually happens in a straight line. There is a reading of English history which has argued that left-wing Puritanism, closely identified with Dissent, “laid down the key principles of modern democracy, including individualism, egalitarianism, and the separation of church and state”.⁶ Whatever the truth here, and I would argue there is much, it is not *simply* true. Dissent, if it eventually became identified with religious freedom and hostility to Establishment, did not uniformly begin as such. Rather it was a struggle over which *version* of the Christian religion should *constitute* the Establishment. Specifically, there was the contest between Episcopalianism and Presbyterianism. For a brief time during the English Civil War, Presbyterianism *was* the Established Church and, to quote John Milton, “new Presbyter was but old Priest writ large”.⁷ In Scotland, Presbyterianism triumphed and relegated the Episcopalians to the status of Dissenters and Nonconformists. The equation of Dissent and opposition to Establishment is not as straightforward as might be assumed. So-called Dissenters have sometimes wanted freedom for their own version of religion in order that, in the name of truth and God, they might deny that freedom to others who were, by their lights, in error. Even those Congregationalists who sought refuge in the New World found the coercive ways of Christendom a hard habit to break.

A Dissenting perspective must therefore come clean: it was only slowly, primarily on the left wing of Dissent, that ‘radical tolerationism’, as Coffey calls it, began to emerge in the writings of such thinkers as John Milton and Roger Williams, and was to do so by means of sharp debate with more conservative Separatists and Independents who were by no means averse to the magistrates punishing deviation in religion. Radical tolerationists advocated full liberty of conscience to all religions. They broke with the Augustinian tradition by insisting that “coercion could never be used to advance true religion”.⁸ The first such call in the English language for full religious freedom was from the pen of the Baptist pioneer Thomas Helwys, founder in 1611 of the first Baptist church in England, who wrote: “Let them be heritickes, Turcks, Jewes or whatsoever it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure”.⁹

⁶ Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration*, p. 3.

⁷ ‘On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament’ (1646).

⁸ Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration*, p. 55.

⁹ *The Mystery of Iniquity* (1612), p. 69.

We owe much to the pioneers of radical tolerationism. What once was a dangerously radical position has become, of course, the standard orthodoxy both in the Western churches and in Western democracies. Much has grown out of what the English twentieth-century writer, D. H. Lawrence, himself a product of Midlands Congregationalism, called the “deep dung of Nonconformity”.¹⁰ We should not forget of course that in many parts of the world, not least in Eastern Europe, religious nationalism continues to make life difficult for what it regards as alien sectarian groups, such as Baptists. Even in Western countries such as France, Belgium and Israel there are weighty issues of religious freedom and discrimination that often go unnoticed and unheeded. However my attention needs to shift away from the historical to the contemporary. Just as we must concede that the essential vision of a free church in a free state is not always synonymous with Dissent as we have viewed it historically, so we must also concede that Establishment need not mean religious coercion.

To look at the idea of an Established church today it is necessary to go beyond the historical debates, to examine contemporary arguments for Establishment from those who are themselves fully persuaded about the case for religious freedom. Contemporary arguments root Establishment not in uniformity but in a kind of partnership of Church and State in which one particular denomination occupies a privileged position, not as a way of advancing its own interests but as a representative of other Christian churches and indeed of other religious traditions. When part of what the Church represents is a complete commitment to religious freedom, this view of Establishment hardly ranks alongside previous understandings, even though it is undoubtedly an evolution from them. In this kind of argument, Establishment is seen as a particular stewardship or *charism* of a State Church being exercised representatively on behalf of all for the greater good of the State and in the fulfilment of that mission in which every aspect of life is, in its potential, claimed for God. It is a recognition that the State too has the duty of rendering obedience to God. This is to express the matter theologically. In less overtly religious terms, no system of government can function without reference to a framework of values, and in a country where the established (small ‘e’) religion is Christian, this fact should at least provide the starting point for debate. How does a Dissenter or Free Church person respond to this reformulation of an Established Church?

My first aim is to interpret the Free Church mind, but as you will see I am also an advocate. For the sake of accuracy I need, for honesty’s sake,

¹⁰ Despite my best efforts I have yet to trace this phrase in D. H. Lawrence’s work.

to record that, just as there are those within the Church of England who are strongly opposed to the Established status of their own Church, so there are within the Free Churches those who are not unhappy with the current status and arrangements of the Church of England. The Free Churches have not only long since enjoyed toleration they have also, in the course of the nineteenth century, overcome the remnants of the civil discrimination to which they were subject. It would not occur to them to think that they were not equal citizens under the law. This is apt to change how Establishment is viewed. There are those, as we have noted, whose denominational histories have been able to countenance some kind of Establishment, but even some who are in more radical traditions, such as my own Baptist tradition, might be inclined to view an Established Church within the constitution as at least some kind of bulwark against secularism and, indeed, as an opportunity for Christian mission. For these reasons, Establishment is far from being a burning issue among the heirs of Dissent in England and some would be inclined to regard it as a recognition that we are still a Christian country. Let me however seek to interpret the continuing Free Church mind as I understand it.

Dissenters have a different way of thinking about this subject and are more inclined to see church and state as, in principle, incommensurate with each other. Any alliance or partnership between them is therefore the bringing together of forces that are at best awkward bed-fellows and at worst mutually subversive. It is not that the church is an unblemished institution. It, too, participates in the fallen-ness of all human structures. But it is a community called into being by the redemptive activity of God in the power of the Holy Spirit which is orientated towards a kingdom that is not of this world. The more the Christian way is viewed as a costly and demanding, if freely chosen, following-after a crucified Messiah, the more incongruous and implausible a partnership of church and state comes to seem.

Dissenters are used to employing a *disjunctive* rather than a *conjunctive* logic. Conjunctive logic has at times in the history of church-state thinking been used to justify monarchy: there is one God, and so there should correspondingly be one Pope, and one Emperor. Divine monarchy validates political monarchy and the ecclesiastical monarchical episcopate. I have referred to the fact that theological ideas concerning the church seek their mirror image in the civil and political communities: here we see examples of that. Dissenting logic however has tended in the opposite direction. Because the Lord is King, there can be no other King. Divine kingship does not validate human kingship but calls it radically into

question since God has no rivals. It is this disjunctive logic that we find Jesus employing in Matthew 23: 8 – 12 (NRSV):

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all students. And call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father – the one in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.

In these words the supreme claim of God and God's Messiah overwhelms, relativises and subverts all other claims, whatever initial validity they may seem to have. Although Dissenters would certainly agree that the state is ordained by God as part of the order of preservation, the means whereby human life is kept from chaos and anarchy, they would not deduce from this that it is anything like an equal partner with the church in God's purposes for creation. The state, whatever form it happens to take, is a limited, this-worldly reality with a constant tendency to self-exaltation. It is closely associated in the biblical tradition with idolatry. Its role is to be acknowledged, respected and constructively enhanced, but also watched, criticised and sometimes resisted since as a fallen power in possession of immense coercive potential it has the greatest difficulty in minding the things of God and seeking God's kingdom in any shape or form. To the Dissenter who seeks above all to be free for God, the desire for Establishment is apt to seem like a beguiling search for worldly significance, a falling-in with the power game that is contrary to the way of Christ, a lust to be acknowledged by those in positions of worldly power.

Now the Dissenting mind I am representing certainly gives a more negative, I would say penetrating, analysis of human power systems than those who favour Establishment might at first sight do. It stresses the disjunction between church and state, the fact that ultimately the state deals in coercion while the church acts by persuasion. To confuse these realms is fatal. In Free Church history this negative view has been balanced by a doctrine of creation and of the cultural mandate, the duty to build culture as part of what it means to be created in the divine image. It is not an attempt to demonise the state since it too belongs to the realm of creation and is providentially over-ruled by God for the preservation of humanity. But the Dissenting view is certainly ambivalent about the state and for that reason, in search of some kind of identity or partnership, it espouses a doctrine of the separation of church and state. The distinctiveness of the church requires it to maintain a critical distance from the state in order that it might remain faithful to its own calling and identity and not become

inappropriately entangled. Once more, words of interpretation are appropriate: separation of church and state does not mean separation of church and society. The church is fully involved in society, doing its best to serve and shape it. The state is entrusted with the monopoly of coercive power as a hedge against disorder and anarchy. As church, it is inappropriate for the church to be in partnership at this point, but individual Christians are certainly at liberty in their capacity as citizens to serve within the legislature, the executive or the enforcement services. They bring their Christian perspectives to bear but do not formally represent the church as church in these capacities. Like everyone else, they struggle conscientiously to do what is right.

This brings me to an area that Dissenters find most difficult and, indeed, offensive and it concerns the government of the Church of England. I have noted that historic Dissent is not one simple entity and there are certainly those within the tradition who might countenance, for instance, the notion of a 'national' Church. The Church of Scotland defines itself in these terms and is an example of an alternative way of being for the Church in relation to the State. The Church of Scotland exists somewhere between an Established church and a Free Church in this regard, having full autonomy and, correspondingly, not having certain privileges, such as seats in the House of Lords. The Sovereign is not its governor. A national church along these lines might be conceivable by some in the tradition of Dissent. But all Dissenters would, in my judgement, resist the arrangement by which the Sovereign appoints the Church of England Bishops, and some others, on the advice of the British Prime Minister, thereby according the secular government a decisive role in the government of the Church. In effect, the Prime Minister has final power of appointment of the Church's leading figures, whatever may be the nature of the Prime Minister's religious convictions or lack of them. The political justification for this is that since Bishops may hold seats in the House of Lords, the Prime Minister should have at least some say as to who these members of Parliament might be. The theological justification is hard to fathom.

At this point the prevailing arrangement usually receives a defence that seeks to show how restricted the Prime Minister's room for manoeuvre actually is, how the Church really controls the process and how the convention is that the first name of two suggested by the Commission should be appointed. It strikes me as the strangest kind of argument to justify these arrangements on the basis of how little they apply. If this really were a good system one might expect that it would be good to have more of it. The fact that we want to make it as minimal as possible suggests

that really we know that it is not a good system. If Her Majesty's Government were to presume to appoint the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, or the President of the Methodist Conference, or the Chief Rabbi, or the President of the Baptist Union, we would think it extremely strange and protest against intrusion in the affairs of non-governmental organisations.

Early in the twentieth century the great historian and sociologist Ernst Troeltsch produced his classic work entitled *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. In it he advanced a typology of Christian teachings concerning church-state relations and within that typology he famously distinguished between the ideal types which he called the 'church-type' and the 'sect-type'. Dissenters represent the sect-type. Of course it needs to be made clear that Troeltsch's language is unfortunate from the Dissenting perspective. His categories are intended to be precisely sociological in nature but it is hard to hear this language without prejudice. The word 'church' used theologically carries great prestige whereas the word 'sect' suggests quite the opposite. Despite this, understood *sociologically* the types are instructive. According to Troeltsch, the church-type aspires to *universality*, the urge to encompass a population and all the orders of life within itself. It thus runs the danger of diluting its distinctive beliefs and convictions, of accommodating itself to and being assimilated into the general religiosity of humankind, of being at the service of forces which, however broadly religious, are minimally Christian. By contrast, the sect-type aspires to *intensity*, to remain true to the distinctive values and beliefs and forms of discipleship which are rooted in Jesus Christ rather than the generalities of human religion.¹¹ Inevitably such intensity leads to a degree of alienation from the prevailing value or power systems, but it is this critical distance that allows the church to maintain a distinctive and prophetic edge.

It would be characteristic of the contemporary world to be distrustful of intense religion of the sect-type. Is it not religious intensity that is at the root of some of our immediate fears and problems? In response, the Dissenter argues that if intensity means close and faithful adherence to the way of Jesus Christ, this is not something to fear since what the world needs is not more religion but more Christ-like living. More greatly to be feared is the power of religious nationalism, when religious identities are so closely identified with ethnic or national interests that the two become both fused and confused. Moreover, the Christian faith in its origin was one

¹¹ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches Volume I* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), pp. 335-7.

which expressly rejected the identification of the people of God with a racial or ethnic identity in favour of a radical openness to all peoples. God's church is an international project which, whilst scattered among the nations, breaks free from too close an association with any one ethnicity or nationhood in order to find its highest priority in the kingdom of God and the love of God for all peoples.

Dissent and Nonconformity as I have described them can be seen to have taken their character from particular experiences in the English context. But at the same time they bear witness to something that belongs to original and normative Christianity. In its origins the Christian faith was a movement of both religious and political Dissent. It dissented religiously within the established religion of its point of origin, Judaism, because of its belief that the Messiah had come in Jesus. It dissented politically because of its belief that Caesar was not Lord, since only Christ could be Lord. This was the ground of its earliest persecution. The story of English Dissent captures something that belongs to the essence of the Christian faith, and to lose what belongs to this story would be to leave Christianity hugely the poorer.

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Baptists and the Orthodox Church: The 'Kostenets Disputes of 1920' in Bulgaria

The 130-year history of the Baptist Churches in Bulgaria has been marked by long-lasting tension and often open confrontation with the main Church, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. To explore in detail the complex development of the relationship between the Orthodox Church and Baptist churches would be a task beyond the limits of this article. The historical importance of that subject, and its implications for Christianity in the country, and even for the political situation of today's Bulgaria, deserves thorough research, based on old and newly found primary sources only available since the fall of the iron curtain in Eastern Europe. This article, however, looks at a particular incident, a series of several disputations between Orthodox priests and missionaries on the one hand, and Baptist pastors and leaders on the other. The disputations took place in 1920 in the village of Kostenets in central Bulgaria. Looking at the events that occurred there, we can draw some general conclusions about the main points of difference between, and the different attitudes of the two confessions.

There are several key elements. First, what happened in the village of Kostenets was a typical story of a small newly-formed Protestant church, striving to establish itself in an Orthodox environment. Secondly, such an open dispute was the first of its kind in Bulgaria.¹ Orthodox priests and theologians, specifically trained to deal with other kinds of believers (sectarians) and officially commissioned by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, engaged in open dispute with Baptist pastors and leaders in front of almost the entire population of the village. Thirdly, the dispute was followed by a typical reaction by the local people, inspired by the attitudes of key religious leaders. Those attitudes could be traced in every period and location in the development of Baptist churches, and indeed the Protestant movement as a whole in Bulgaria, even to the present day. Fourthly, based on their view of these disputes, the Orthodox Church, through one of its missionaries, officially published, in 1920 and later reprinted on three occasions (from 1928 to 1939), material² that claimed to be a test "for future debates with all the sectants and sectarian teachings and their lies on the territory of the Bulgarian Kingdom".³ The last republishing of that book was in 1994 and it claimed to be a tool for the

¹ Arch. Methodiy, *Disputes of the Synod Missionary M. A. Kalnev* (Army Press Fund, Sofia, 1920), p.2.

² M. A. Kalnev, *Shield of the Faith* (Sinodalno Izdatelstvo, Sofia, 1939).

³ Methodiy, *Disputes of the Synod Missionary M. A. Kalnev*, p.3

Orthodox believers which would guide them in approaching Protestant teachings and sectarian communities.

Before we analyse the primary sources describing the events in question it is important to make some general remarks about the historical beginnings of Orthodox-Baptist relationships.

Historical background

The early days of the Baptist movement coincide with a period of Bulgarian history, the 1870s, when Bulgaria was still under Turkey. At that time there was a particularly active struggle on behalf of the Bulgarians for an independent (from the Byzantine Patriarch in Konstantinopol) Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Looking at the broader (earlier) picture, the beginnings of the Protestant movement in Bulgaria in the middle of the nineteenth century was marked by a clear feeling that there was a “faith homogeneity in the Bulgarian Nation and furthermore, there was a strong tradition to equate belonging to the Bulgarian Nation with belonging to Orthodoxy”.⁴

That is why the first Protestant missionaries in the territories of today's Bulgaria (from America) seemed convinced that they should “labor for the salvation of the Bulgarians in their church [the Orthodox church], in distinction from laboring with the expectation that separate Protestant communities would be formed in time”.⁵ Such an opinion was shared for example by James F. Clark, an American missionary to the Bulgarians in 1864: “We do not come to ask you to leave your church, but to receive the Bible and live by it in the church”.⁶ However, over the next fifteen years it became obvious that such a change was impossible, since the same missionary expressed, in 1881, a clear disbelief in the possibility of reforming the Orthodox church. According to him, any spiritual reform achieved prior to 1881 “was not in the church, but rather despite of it...”. He concluded: “our hope for the renovation of the Bulgarian people is rather in the (forming) of the Evangelical communities...”.⁷

Several key differences between the Orthodox Church and the new Protestant ideas kept the initial plans of the Evangelical missionaries from being brought to completion. Those differences were a result of theological and cultural backgrounds. The Evangelicals were viewed as foreign

⁴ N. K. Krastev, *The Protestant Sects in Bulgaria* (Partizdat, Sofia, 1972), p.94.

⁵ W. Meriam William, quoted by Tatyana Nestorova, *American Missionaries Among the Bulgarians (1858-1912)* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1987), p. 9.

⁶ F. Shashko, Betty Greenberg, R. Genov, *American travel notes for Bulgaria during the XIX Century* (Planeta 3, Sofia, 2001), p. 79.

⁷ Nestorova, *American Missionaries Among the Bulgarians*, p. 15.

representatives of a strange religion. They were considered carriers of western political and ideological thoughts and their convictions were often seen as a threat to national identity. That was particularly evident during the first 10-20 years after the liberation of the Bulgarian nation (1878) from the long Ottoman yoke, and during the years following the Balkan, the All-European and the Inter-allied wars (1912-1918). The Orthodox claim for Orthodox territories, the theology behind incorporating people into the church (baptizing children), and salvation by the rituals of the 'One True Apostolic Church', immediately placed the 'newcomers' in the position of proselytising communities who were "trespassers in the righteous Orthodox garden". The strong emphasis on evangelism that was so typical for Protestant believers was in sharp contradiction with the territorial approach of the Orthodox tradition. The understanding for Protestant faith that the Bible was foundational was in conflict with the emphasis by the Orthodox on Scripture and Holy Church Tradition. Stress on reading the Scriptures, the right to interpret them and the availability of the Bible to every believer was in direct confrontation with the authority given to Orthodox priests to read the Bible. The clear message in the mother tongue of the listeners, which was the centre of evangelical worship, was very different from the Orthodox liturgy that was still in old Slavonic, was mystical and lacked any kind of sermon.

W. Mariam, an American colporteur, quoted a priest he had met during one of his journeys, who admitted: "We call ourselves Christians, but we do not know much about the Christian teaching, we are totally passive and far away from it. Even the ordinary people are more knowledgeable than us, the priests. That is why there are two reasons why we do not preach – we do not know how, and when we try doing it, the people do not listen to us. We just do our job for the money. We do not even pray..."⁸ That is why many priests did not even want to talk to the Protestants, especially their leaders, who showed a better knowledge of the Scriptures. Visiting another place, Mariam concluded: "There were 20 priests in that town, but no one of them wanted to even say a word to the 'protestant dog'".⁹

Several of the elements of the liturgy within Orthodox worship were never acceptable to the Protestants: worship to icons, praying to the Saints and the Virgin Mary, lighting of candles for blessing and health, taking food to graveyards and the whole system of rituals connected with dead people. All of these were connected with financial compensation for the

⁸ Shashko, *American travel notes for Bulgaria during the XIX Century*, p. 47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

priest. Thus, the message of the Evangelicals and in particular the Baptists was hitting the very foundation of Orthodox liturgy and tradition, was reducing the influence of local priests and very often was also diminishing their income. The evangelical emphasis on morality and righteous living, abstention from alcohol, etc., often confronted the lifestyle of the priests. Naturally, the priests were motivating the general population, even those that did not share any religious convictions, to despise the Protestants with 'their righteousness'. That is why I agree with the conclusion of Prof. Krustev who, from a Marxist perspective, states: "It is historically true that not only the servants of Orthodoxy, but also a large percentage of the ordinary population viewed the Baptists as proselytizers, breakers of people's traditions, cosmopolitans, and carriers of ideas and interests foreign to the people."¹⁰

Overview of the events

Three decades after the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman yoke, in the little village of Kostenets a small group of Protestants (Baptists) faced an undesirable, but unavoidable fight for their right to confess and practice their own convictions. At that time (1920) in Bulgaria the first democratic constitution was in operation – the Turnovo Constitution¹¹. That Constitution guaranteed the democratic foundations of the newly freed nation.¹² In this Constitution we read that "the Christians from non-Orthodox convictions and people that hold to another faith... have complete freedom to their beliefs and practices as long as the later are not in breach of the existing laws in the Kingdom".¹³

The events that occurred in Kostenets were shocking. In the second half of November 1920, at their celebration announcing the Baptist church in Kostenets as an independent (from Sofia) Baptist church, the believers invited the two Orthodox priests. Toward the end of the service, the younger priest stood up and spoke abusively. After some words were exchanged, the priests called for a public debate. They suggested that the leaders of the two confessions should defend their positions, so that the people could make up their mind as to who was right, the Orthodox or the Baptists. It was obvious that the priests were not prepared to tolerate the

¹⁰ Krastev, *The Protestant Sects in Bulgaria*, p. 95.

¹¹ The Turnovo Constitution was the first Constitution of the liberated Bulgarian Kingdom that was accepted by the first National Assembly, called the great National Assembly, in the capital Turnovo, in 1879.

¹² That Constitution was based on the principles of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Belgium and represented one of the most democratic constitutions Bulgaria had ever had.

¹³ Constitution of the Bulgarian Kingdom, Turnovo, 1879, Ch. 40, 41

presence of a Baptist church in the village. The disputations took place a few days later, at several separate meetings. The day after the last debate, the local police chief arrested the Baptist pastor and a member of the church. After several hours in custody, the pastor managed to escape, but the other man was brutally beaten, almost to death. Meanwhile their wives, who came to ask the police to release their husbands, were persecuted themselves. The women were physically threatened and narrowly avoided being raped by police officers. They were later beaten themselves and were forced to find money and give this illegally, as a bribe, to the police for the release of their men. The chief policeman took the money but did not release the prisoners. The member of the church was released the next morning in a bad physical condition.

Before we continue, we need to point out one more thing. The village of Kostenets was situated at the periphery of an area which played a significant historical role in Bulgaria in the decades after the liberation from the Ottoman yoke. Here the first principles of social tolerance and freedom of conscience had been determined, principles that later would constitute Bulgarian society as a truly democratic society. The national mentality and the democratic Turnovo Constitution should have excluded the possibility of religious discrimination. How was it possible for repression to occur? The disputations could not be separated from the violence that followed. We cannot avoid asking the following question: since the right of freedom of religion was guaranteed and this was happening in an area where the new ideas of democracy were widespread, how do we explain the repression of the Baptists? Was the reason the personal intolerance of the police officers or was a spiritual and even political strategy being followed: the misuse of power against a religious minority?

The setting of the Disputes

The little group of evangelicals in Kostenets was formed in 1893-94, although the Orthodox priests said at the disputation that they were around as early as 1863.¹⁴ In 1893 the first people were converted and some months later, as reported in the Baptist *Evangelist*, several were baptised by the former pastor of the Russe Baptist Church¹⁵, Vasil H. Marchev, who

¹⁴ Methodiy, *Disputes of the Synod Missionary M. A. Kalnev*, p.3. This date '1863' is obviously wrong since it is a well-known fact that the first Evangelical church (Congregationals) was formed no earlier than 1868. See Boris Kojuharov, *The First Evangelical church in Bulgaria* (New Man, Sofia, 1998).

¹⁵ *Evangelist*, 1921, Chirpan, Issue 1, p.12.

then lived in Sofia.¹⁶ For a few years the small group met in homes until 1908, when increased numbers meant that the group became a branch of Sofia Baptist Church.¹⁷ In the following years the group grew further, reaching twenty members before the wars of 1912-1918¹⁸. Their evangelical faith did not stop the men in that community taking part in the wars. At least two of them died for their national commitment.¹⁹ This is interesting to note, since one of the main accusations against the Protestants in the debates was their betrayal of their national identity and native country. At the Conference of Bulgarian Baptists in September 1920 in Sofia, the church in Kostenets asked the Union to ordain Peter Zashev as their full-time pastor. At that time Zashev stated that the church had twelve members, most of them women.²⁰ Zashev was ordained at the Conference.

At that time Kostenets was a village of approximately 800 houses, with a population of about 4,000 people. Together with their children, the total number of Baptists was no more than thirty, representing four whole families (13 people) and another seventeen people from different families.²¹ Since the church now had a pastor, they sent a letter to the church in Sofia asking for the right to be an independent Baptist church. In a letter of 20 September 1920 the leadership of the Sofia Baptists, according to the Baptist Constitution, accepted their suggestion and appointed a date – 3 October 1920 – when in Kostenets “six brothers and sisters from Sofia were to come” to celebrate the announcing of the new church in Kostenets.

The announcement of a new church, even a small one, was considered a great joy. That was why, on the day, many guests from all over the country came to Kostenets. Some of the most distinguished pastors and Baptist missionaries from Sofia, Stara Zagora, Chirpan and Lom took part in the service. The two Orthodox priests of the village, Ivan P. Angelov and Peter Komarov, were politely invited to the service. After the emotional sermons and especially after a young man publicly confessed his sins and prayed for forgiveness at the service, Ivan Angelov made a sign indicating that he wanted to say something. The opportunity was given to him with joy, but he took an icon out of his pocket, and accused the Baptists of proselytising, stealing souls from the Orthodox people and “leaving their father’s faith, the faith of those that have begotten them and

¹⁶ Hristo Kulitchev, *Vestiteli na Istinata* (Bulgarian Bible Society, Sofia, 1994), p. 335.

¹⁷ *Evangelist*, 1920, Sofia, Issue 3, p.6.

¹⁸ The Balkan, the All-European and the Inter-allied wars (1912-1918).

¹⁹ Their names are Mitko Mandjukov and St. Ilchev - *Evangelist*, 1921, Chirpan, Issue 1, p. 8.

²⁰ *Evangelist*, 1921, Chirpan, Issue 1, p.12.

²¹ Methodiy, *Disputes of the Synod Missionary M. A. Kalnev*, p.3.

gave them life”.²² He told the congregation that he would call a public disputation. Pastor Vidolov, the pastor of Sofia Baptist Church and Secretary of the Union of Baptist Churches at that time, accepted the challenge. The readiness of the evangelicals to come and “take part in disputation at any time” surprised the priests and they asked for a period of time “to fast, pray and confess wherever it was necessary”. For some reason they requested forty-nine days to prepare.

The preparation of Ivan Angelov was expressed in asking for official help from the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Sofia. His request was even published in the official newspaper of the Holy Synod – *Tsurkoven Vestnik*.²³ Two people were sent from Sofia, Archimandrid Methodiy, and a missionary, Michail A. Kalnev. Methodiy was there to represent the Synod, and Kalnev, a Russian theologian, was sent to lead the disputes, since he was specifically trained to “deal with sectants and other dangerous people”.²⁴

Kalnev had emigrated from Russia a few years earlier after some disagreements with the Russian Orthodox leaders, because of his extreme views. Some of these views become clear when we read his books. One was entitled, *To withstand the evil by force*.²⁵ In this book, envisioning the evil that is present in Protestant and every other ‘sectant’ teaching, he writes: “[i]t is clearly necessary to fight the evil not only with moral verbal persuasion, but also by force and even by physical restraining of the appearance and spreading of the evil...”.²⁶ This is a moral obligation of every true Christian – an obligation that springs from the Christian Message and the love toward every person’s soul...”.²⁷ His views about “fighting the wrong teaching in disputes” obviously went much further than just a verbal fight. Kalnev is also the author of *The Shield of Faith* which was specifically written as a “Missionary guide for leading disputes with Catholics, Protestants and the brand new sectants: Tolstoyists, Theosophists, Spiritists, Danovists and others”.²⁸

Being absolutely sure about the defeat of the Baptists, Ivan Angelov sent an official letter to the new pastor of the Kostenets Baptist Church, Peter Zashev, dated 15 November 1920, much earlier than the forty-nine days the priests had initially requested. The letter contained accusations

²² *Evangelist*, 1920, Sofia, Issue 4, pp. 1, 2.

²³ *Tsurkoven Vestnik*, Issue 28, 20 November 1920.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ M. A. Kalnev, *To Withstand the Evil by Force* (Svetia Synod na BPT, Sofia, 1931).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁸ Kalnev, *Shield of the Faith* (Pechatnitsa Doverie, Sofia, 1924).

about the activity of the Protestants in the village: secret visits to the homes of villagers for the purpose of stealing souls for Protestantism, wrong belief in so called “evangelical righteousness”, proselytism in “cutting branches from the Orthodox Vine”, selling their own souls to “foreign interests for dollars”, and wrong assumptions that the Orthodox believers are idol-worshippers etc.²⁹ The letter contained an invitation to a dispute on 21 November 1920. There is mention in the letter about the help that was about to be sent by the Holy Synod in Sofia.

Zashev wrote an answer, stating that no one had the right to call the houses of the village ‘theirs’, neither could the Baptists be accused of secretly working to steal anyone. The answer contained words of criticism about the morality of the lives of the priests and some of the practices of the Orthodox Church such as “bringing food to the dead on certain Saturdays at the graveyards”, which the young pastor called an “assault on the enlightenment and the intelligence”. The invitation to a disputation was accepted with the words: “we are ready to come and defend the truth and the Gospel of Christ even today, but only within the limits of the Bible. Out of the Scriptures we are not ready to accept any philosophies”.³⁰

After sending their answer, the Baptists were informed from Sofia that Kalnev would be leading the disputes and that Arh. Methodiy would be there to represent the Holy Synod. The *Evangelist* states that tension was high in the village. Some people openly threatened the Baptists with “severe persecution very soon”. The church in Kostenets asked Sofia Baptists for help, whereupon Pastor Z. Vidolov arrived. According to the material in *Evangelist* he and Zashev met with Kalnev and the two local priests on the evening of 20 November 1920 to discuss and determine the subject of the disputes. Although the Baptists wanted to discuss ‘repentance’ or one of the subjects suggested in the letter of Ivan Angelov, the Orthodox Missionary, Kalnev, only agreed to talk about the ‘Eucharist’.³¹ On the Sunday before the second³² (the first open)³³ dispute, an unusual number of people attended the Sunday services at the Orthodox Church in the village. A.M. Kalnev spoke very energetically against the Protestants as “sectants, separatists, deceivers, betrayers... etc.” The official theme of this ‘unusual’ (for the Orthodox liturgies) sermon was: “The Church of Christ, One and Only, Holy, Apostolic Church, outside of

²⁹ The full text of the letter is printed in *Evangelist*, 1920, Sofia, Issue 4, pp. 4, 5.

³⁰ Ibid., p.5.

³¹ Ibid., p.6.

³² According to the Orthodox source.

³³ According to *Evangelist*.

which there is no salvation”.³⁴ He finished this sermon with an appeal to defend the church from the Protestant disease.³⁵

The Sources

There are two main sources from which we learn about the disputes. One is the *Evangelist*, which in 1920 was a quarterly publication, and the other is a book by the Orthodox entitled *Disputes of the Synod Missionary M. A. Kalnev*, published by the Army Press Fund, Sofia 1920. It is important to notice that the two sources are targeting completely different audiences. *Evangelist* was a small publication (in 1920 not more than 500 copies) and was written to address the needs of Baptist readers in 25 churches with a total membership of 252 countrywide.³⁶ It was spread only among Baptists and copies were sent to Kostenets. The article describing events in Kostenets is headed “worrying news” and asks “what the results for the future are going to be if the evangelicals are treated in that way by people representing the governmental power?”³⁷ The information about the disputes was given as part of a picture of persecution and abuse, rather than as a tool to defend somebody’s theological positions.

The booklet, *Disputes of the Synod Missionary M. A. Kalnev*, was published in sufficient numbers to “be given into the hands of every person faithful to his native country’s Orthodox faith”.³⁸ The desire of the author, Methodiy, was that “all the shepherds of the Orthodox territories that have been infected with the Protestant disease, could benefit from the presence of one of the most skillful anti-sectarian missionaries – Kalnev in Bulgaria”.³⁹ The estimated number of copies of this booklet was probably higher than 10,000. It had all the elements of propaganda literature. Interestingly enough, the publishing house that printed the material was not the official printing house of the Holy Synod, but the Army Press Fund. This publishing house had been known as being willing to print anything, as long as they were paid for it, but they did not take any responsibility for the authenticity of their materials. The Press was there to raise funds for the Bulgarian Army. Their literature had a low standard of style, language and even spelling. This is significant, since Methodiy stated that “these disputations represent a vital (life and death) interest naturally for every

³⁴ Arch. Methodiy, *Disputes of the Synod Missionary M. A. Kalnev*, p.11.

³⁵ Ibid., p.13.

³⁶ *Evangelist*, 1920, Issue 3, p.3-17.

³⁷ *Evangelist*, 1920, Issue 4, p16.

³⁸ Arch. Methodiy, *Disputes of the Synod Missionary M. A. Kalnev*, p. 4.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 47.

priest and layperson in the Orthodox church”.⁴⁰ As the official representative of the Holy Synod at the disputations, and given his position within the structure of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, he should not have had any problems using the much more trustworthy Holy Synod Press. Maybe the Army Press Fund was cheaper or maybe the Holy Synod was not prepared to back the material by using their official publishing house.

The two sources present dramatic differences. The Orthodox source gives many words spoken by the Orthodox representatives, but records very little of what the Baptists said. Similarly, *Evangelist* states in full the words of the Baptists and records very little of what the priests were saying. Both sources claim decisive victory for their representatives in the disputes and both sources state that the public was enlightened and persuaded of the arguments of the respective sides. The Orthodox source lists four disputes, claiming that the first took place on 20 November at 9 a.m., whereas the Baptist source only lists three disputations, the first on 21 November, Sunday, at 2 p.m., and it gives very little information about the third disputation.⁴¹ The Orthodox source does not mention events prior to the disputation and claims that the Orthodox Missionary, M. A. Kalnev, went to Kostenets and called the Baptist sectants to have a disputation with him. Neither does the Orthodox source give information about the terrible events after the disputations. This is only found in the *Evangelist*.

The Disputes

The first disputation, according to the Orthodox source, took place on 20 November (Saturday) when pastor Zashev together with three “adherents came to discuss the theme of the Sacrament of Baptism, in connection with the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition”⁴². The Orthodox source says that the Orthodox missionary asked the Baptists what they based their teaching upon. The answer was “only on the Holy Scripture and nothing else”. The rest of the dispute was the Orthodox missionary ‘proving’ to the Baptists the reality of the Holy Tradition. That was done by quoting numerous parts of the Scripture, but without discussion. He just stated the conclusions to which the reader of those Scriptures should have arrived. Zashev was quoted as admitting several times that he had nothing to answer

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴¹ Apparently, Z. Vidolov, who was obviously the author of the article in *Evangelist* did not stay for the third disputation, but went back to Sofia. Zashev took part in the dispute on behalf of the Baptists. *Evangelist*, 1920, Sofia, Issue 4, p.13.

⁴² Arch. Methodiy, *Disputes of the Synod Missionary M. A. Kalnev*, pp. 5-9.

to the “logical and Biblical arguments” of the Orthodox missionary. The Orthodox source described the disappointment and hopelessness that the Baptists ‘felt’ in the face of the arguments of Kalnev. Later the source records that Zashev admitted there was a Holy Tradition, but that this tradition was not important for Salvation, and that the Holy Tradition was as important as Scripture, but he was not able to accept the tradition that allowed the Orthodox priests to baptize children.

Then the question moved to Baptism, and again the Missionary was quoted as enlightening the Baptists on the subject, by using biblical quotations and examples of the Holy Tradition. Gradually the Baptists, who still did not have much to say, admitted that in Baptism there was an imputation of Grace for salvation. They even promised that if the missionary proved from the Bible that this was so, they would start baptizing their children. However, after Kalnev ‘proved’ that decisively, they did not keep their promise. The source comments that this brought a “strong indignation upon the faces of the righteous Orthodox people... whose conscience was deeply moved against the sectants who were so obviously showing that they did not seek after the truth, but were stubborn in their deadly deceit”.

It is difficult to dismiss the information that the Orthodox source is giving us, since the only other source that we have available is the Baptist magazine *Evangelist*. It would be equally wrong to dismiss the information in *Evangelist*. It would have been helpful to have another, third source of information available. It seems doubtful to me that this first disputation took place at all. First, it is obvious that the Protestants were worried about the coming of A. M. Kalnev, and called for help from Videlov. It is very unlikely that they would engage in a disputation without Videlov’s presence. Second, at 9 a.m. on Saturday (a working day in Bulgaria in 1920) it would have been very unlikely that people would gather for any kind of dispute. We notice that apart from the one on Sunday, which took place at 2 p.m. (on a day for going to church and rest), the other two disputations were scheduled for 6 p.m. and 7 p.m., because people could not leave their work earlier. Thirdly, the Orthodox source does not state any location for that dispute and does not mention the number of people there. Fourthly, the source speaks about Zashev and three men from the Baptist church. The problem is that the Baptist church in Kostenets was primarily women. It was very unlikely that the church had four men ready for a dispute. My conclusion is that the Orthodox source ‘needed’ to invent that preliminary disputation to set the scene. Most of the arguments presented in

the other disputations are based on Holy Tradition; thus it was helpful to 'prove' that the Baptists agreed about that, before describing further talks.

The following three disputes⁴³ all took place in the local village school. The first, at 2 p.m. on Sunday, 21 November, was on the Holy Eucharist, led by M. A. Kalnev and Vidolov; the second, at 7 p.m.⁴⁴ on Monday, 22 November, led by Ivan Angelov with the help of M. A. Kalnev, and with Vidolov representing the Baptists, was on the Holy Tradition of the Orthodox Church; and the final disputation on Thursday, 25 November was on "the worship of the holy icons", when the key spokesman was the older village priest, Komarov, helped extensively by Kalnev. At the third disputation, pastor Zashev represented the Baptists.

There are several similarities among the three disputations, as is obvious by analysing both sources. Although the two sources tend to quote their own representatives extensively at the expense of their opponents, it is clear that the Orthodox priests were leading and controlling the discussions. First, they always had the right to the opening speeches and had the right to interrupt their opponents. On two occasions in the first disputation Vidolov had to ask for the right to finish what he wanted to say.⁴⁵ Also, the Orthodox priests determined when the disputations would finish and what the subjects would be. That was especially true for the third and fourth ones⁴⁶, but even the opening words of Vidolov at the second one, after the priests had spoken for a while, showed that there was no equality in choosing the subjects: "... I would have liked to talk to you on a more important subject, namely repentance... but the will of our opponents was to talk about the Eucharist...".⁴⁷ It is also notable that the Orthodox priests, although reading long passages from the Bible, did not comment on them and did not interpret what they had read.⁴⁸ Every interpretation that was suggested by the Evangelicals, on either the texts they or their opponents had, was quickly determined as 'sectant' twisting of the Bible texts.

Let us make some remarks about the content of the three disputes. The Baptists were accusing the Orthodox priests of keeping traditions that were not biblical. Baptists attacked the whole ritual system in the Orthodox

⁴³ *Evangelist*, 1920, Issue 4, pp. 7-13; Arch. Methodiy, *Disputes of the Synod Missionary M. A. Kalnev*, pp. 5-46.

⁴⁴ *Evangelist* states 6 p.m.

⁴⁵ *Evangelist*, 1920, Issue 4, pp. 8, 9.

⁴⁶ Using the numbering of the Orthodox source.

⁴⁷ *Evangelist*, 1920, Issue 4, p. 7.

⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that not until 1963 were the Orthodox priests in Bulgaria at liberty to share interpretations on certain passages of the Scriptures. That right was only kept for theologians and only in a written form agreed by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

tradition – connected with worshipping in the names of the saints, icon-worship, the huge fees that priests were taking for liturgical services, and the personal lives of the priests with their drinking of alcohol and being unfaithful to their wives. On the other, the Orthodox Priests accused the Baptists of being ‘foreign’ to the Bulgarian religion, of serving Western interests and money, of having no respect for Tradition, of speaking about ‘righteousness’ achieved here on earth, and of stealing people from their native faith.

During the disputes, Orthodox doctrines – God’s revelation through Church Tradition being primary for God’s revelation in Scripture; the Holy Sacraments⁴⁹, left by Jesus Christ to impute salvation and spirituality; the One Holy Apostolic Church, out of which there was no salvation; worshipping God through icons; liturgical elements such as candles, burning incense and praying to the saints and Mary; the real body and blood of Christ being eaten in the Eucharist – were all set out. These were set against Baptist understandings – salvation by faith in Jesus Christ only; being accepted by God on the basis of that faith and not on the basis of sacraments and works; the Sacraments as symbols of internal faith and not imputing any ‘special’ grace to the participant; baptism of grown up believers only; the sole revelation of God expressed in the Scriptures and seen in the person of Jesus Christ, not in any traditions created by men; the right and commitment to share your faith and bring people to an understanding of faith.

Some of the words the Orthodox priests used to address the Baptists were: “sectants, heretics, enemies of true faith, mentally ill, stubborn, evil, outrageous and violent people, people for whom there was no salvation, but eternal death”. Baptists in their turn spoke about the Orthodox as “people with no knowledge of the Word that substitute faith with tradition who have no desire to live a righteous life before God”. One thing is obvious: in both sources the two sides were not paying attention to what the other was saying. In a sense ‘disputation’ is a misleading term, since we are witnessing almost no interaction of the spokesmen with each other.

Further developments

As already explained, after the disputations were over two of the Baptist leaders were arrested. *Evangelist* stated: “The Kostenets priests, after their unfruitful attempts to refute the Biblical evidences of the Evangelicals ... and since in that fight the Orthodox missionary A. M. Kalnev and Arh.

⁴⁹ Baptism, Eucharist, etc. all seven of them.

Methodiy could not help them at all.... decided to turn to the civil power for help...”⁵⁰ An official accusation was printed and the two local priests submitted it to the chief of police in the village, who in his turn began collecting signatures against the Baptists. We do not know the exact text of the written document containing the accusations,⁵¹ but the *Evangelist* states that of the 4,000 people living in the village, only seventeen signed it. The same evening the arrests were made and the “orthodox apologetics was completed in the cold basement of the police building in the darkness of the night”.⁵²

A few months later the *Evangelist* reported that the two priests had distributed a special brochure against the Baptists.⁵³ Despite the measures that may have been taken by the ministry of Internal Affairs in Sofia after a complaint was filed by the repressed people in Kostenets,⁵⁴ and despite the efforts of the Baptist Union leaders in encouraging the Baptist church in the village to continue its ministry, it took several years before there was any evidence of growth in the church. Many church members gave the reason for this that people feared the “repression that might follow if you even talk to the Baptists”.⁵⁵

Conclusion

What can we conclude from this isolated but key event for the relationships between the Orthodox Church and the Protestants in Bulgaria? Firstly, there was no real dialogue between the two religious groups. There was no desire to get acquainted with the particularities of each other’s confessions. There was no evident respect for each other’s beliefs and convictions and definitely no wish to find common beliefs. Secondly, there was definite hostility expressed by the Orthodox leaders toward the Evangelicals, which often crossed the boundaries of religious disagreement and overflowed in physical abuse. The civil powers – the police – were not only taking sides, but defending the Church by force. This incident was not isolated. There are many examples of priests leading open confrontations against

⁵⁰ *Evangelist*, 1920, Issue 4, p. 9.

⁵¹ The author of this essay still hopes that more materials will be made available in the future, but so far the police records in that part of Bulgaria are not completely open to the public.

⁵² *Evangelist*, 1920, Issue 4, p. 14.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1921, Issue 1, p. 10. Unfortunately, we do not have a copy of that brochure available today.

⁵⁴ Although the story is told by some old Christian members of Sofia Baptist still living, that the local chief of police in Kostenets was fined and even sent to prison for a few months as punishment for misusing power, there is no concrete evidence that such a measure was taken by the M of IA in Sofia at the time.

⁵⁵ *Evangelist*, 1925, Issue 8, p. 4.

Protestants, which often resulted in people being beaten and pushed out of their homes and villages, even to the point of physical abuse on women and children.⁵⁶ The vision of many Orthodox leaders and people then (and today) was that the Orthodox Church should be made a state church, and should receive help from the government against the sects.

The Orthodox Church clearly considered itself the Only True Church. In its theology, although the Orthodox fully accepted the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of everyone as essential for salvation, they insisted that this salvation could only be reached within the membership of their church and only through performing the sacraments. Connected with that was their understanding of canonical territories belonging to the Orthodox Church. All of this gave the foundational belief that it was right to be violent to anyone that was not Orthodox, but dared to live in 'Orthodox territory' and insisted on 'different' convictions. Baptists, and indeed anyone who was not Orthodox, were considered out of the church, out of the faith and excluded from salvation. The Baptists, on the other hand, despised all the rituals and symbolic liturgy of the Orthodox Church. They defended their attitude with the fact that the Scriptures gave very little ground for such practices. In their view the Orthodox Church was nominal, and it was "sentenced to die by the Gospel, reason and history".⁵⁷ There was very little desire on the side of the Protestants for co-operation and any kind of dialogue. They often considered the Orthodox Church as a church that could not bring the Gospel to the people, and therefore "could not lead anyone to salvation".⁵⁸ The events from Kostenets, although a 'photograph' of a particular scene, characterised the general state of relationships and expressed the attitudes of believers among the Orthodox and among the Protestants in Bulgaria, attitudes that to a greater or lesser extent persist to the present day.

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⁵⁶ I can give many examples. Here are two: Peter Doichev writes from Chirpan: "Inspired by the priests, the whole society, lay people, police... everyone embittered against me Verbal abuse, biting and attacks were my daily experience against me and my family" (*Home and Foreign Land*, Vol. 5, Jan – Dec, 1921, p. 7). The same year, 1920, in Sofia an Orthodox Missionary Society 'St. Cyril and Methodius' was formed, whose sole purpose was to "chase the Evangelical away from Bulgaria" (*Evangelist*, 1920, Issue 2, p. 16).

⁵⁷ *Evangelist*, 1920, Issue 4, p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Art Across Contexts: Utilizing the Aesthetic in Transmitting the Sacramental

Christianity, in its various denominational incarnations, has developed its own unique aesthetic conventions for imparting the holy, but since the 16th century Reformation an over-emphasis within the Protestant tradition on word-oriented truth has eclipsed artistic means. Presently, there is a need, I would argue, within the milieu outside the Orthodox-Catholic framework to reinstate the aesthetic partnership with theology in imparting redemptive presence congregationally. While numerous secular aesthetic mediums are utilised within today's diverse Christian life and liturgy, imagination and discretion are equally needed in their implementation, since symbolic arts bear deeply entrenched language and values that may produce significant ramifications when joined with the sacramental focus and salvific message of the church.

The aim in this article is three fold: to uncover the application of aesthetics in ecclesial life; to illustrate how the contextual presuppositions of artistic conventions 'seep out' when adapted to new arenas; and to establish the aesthetic as a means of knowing the presence of God. Accomplishing this task will necessitate several areas of analysis. Initially, the subjugation of the arts in the church will be considered in an effort to better understand the present situation. Secondly, two examples of aesthetics employed cross-contextually will be observed and their efficacy evaluated in the light of Paul Tillich and James Wm. McClendon Jr's postulates for a theology of art. Finally, in an attempt to give parameters to a rubric that might re-integrate the essential function of the arts, indicators in artistic works which signal their suitability for use liturgically will be sketched briefly. The dialectical relationship of the arts and theology via the insights of the British Baptist theologian and literary scholar, Paul S. Fiddes, will be applied as a logical conclusion rounding out the synthesis.

A Proscriptive Past?

The marriage between word-based theology and the arts has long been a turbulent one. Clear signs of discord can be traced back to the eighth-century iconoclast controversy, which, despite its resolution at the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicea, still goes practically unrecognised by a wide

section of the church catholic.¹ Though further domestic doctrinal violence was averted through the policing of the 7th Nicene Council, it was by no means a lasting remedy. By the time the church's age had doubled from the years of iconoclasm more discord over the issue was brewing. The middle ages emanated rays of gospel enlightenment in the reassertion of the written word of God: an illumination desperately needed to reveal the disease festering in numerous vestiges of the Western church.

In the 16th century, with further zeal for reform, the aesthetic creativity of the church (often abused by the popular piety of medieval lay people and the manipulating patronage of the rich), underwent Protestant excoriation in an effort to purify Christ's Body.² The return to a simpler Christianity involved the hope that human corruption would be dealt with through scripture, coupled with, among other factors, the proliferation of literacy and printed materials which blossomed from the fourteenth century. This supplanted, to some extent, the old aesthetic order in imparting the divine message. Emerging under the Protestant banner of *Sola Scriptura*, a revolutionary manner of receiving theological truth shifted the focus of Christendom toward chiefly word-centred means of dissemination. This denigration of the visual and demise of the artistic was probably never the intent of Luther nor the bulk of his theological progeny, but as often occurs in convictional transformation there can be a degree of overcompensation.³

Logos chauvinism in Protestantism led those outside its margins to care for the gentler partner of the rational-aesthetic union. Via the philosophy of Modernism, which played such a key role in word-focused theology, a further alienation occurred. Following the logical outcome of Descartes' rationale that assumes sensory perceptions to be suspect and views the solitary thinking self as exclusively certain, Immanuel Kant furnished the world with his theory of aesthetic disinterestedness.⁴ Like Descartes' rational self, this disinterestedness was innate, universal and issued forth on its own.⁵ Borrowing the overarching objectivity of

¹ Mary Jo Weaver, *Introduction to Christianity*, 3rd edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998), pp. 74-76 and John H. Leith (ed.), *Creeds of the Church: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd edition (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 53-56.

² Georg Kretschmar, 'The Reformation and the Theology of Images', Gennadios Limouris (compl.), *Icons: Windows on Eternity, Theology and Spirituality in Colour*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990), pp. 76-85.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 81-82 and James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, rev. ed. (Trinity Press Intl., 1994).

⁴ Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 187-192.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.192-193

Modernism, a lofty niche was carved out for art, the marriage partner whose nagging vagueness always bothered her 'purely' logical half. She, with her talents for metaphor, would exist solely for her own sake, rising above the banality of everyday life.

Aesthetic Acts: The Other Knowledge

Although thought to derive her being from feminine beauty and sensual pleasure, art was far more multifaceted and capable of conveying meaning than logic conceded. Certainly, pleasure and beauty are basic to artistic endeavour; but art does more than inject the beautiful into human reality; it speaks expressively to the mind and soul just as much as rationality.⁶ Perhaps art is not only more eloquent but actually more effective in doing so. By this, it may be understood that the communicative power of the arts is an inextricable component of its enticing beauty. Tragically, the path of divorce between theology's rational and artistic means of knowing has forced a disparity which grants the spoken and written word primacy in communicating Christian convictions, while conceding mere 'visiting rights' to aesthetic works. This promotes scepticism about the arts' vital function in communicating the holy.

A fear of irrationality has, therefore, held the arts at a distance and deprived the church of what George Steiner calls, ". . . the most 'ingressive', transformative summons available to human experiencing".⁷ Without art, human understanding and being are less than whole. Speaking from the vantage point of Orthodoxy, whose stance affords a strict yet affirmative posture toward the aesthetic, Kallistos Ware explains: "In our literal use of words we reach the reasoning brain; by means of poetry and music, of art, symbol and ritual act, we reach the other layers of the human personality. The one aspect of worship is essential to the other."⁸

To a large extent, postmodern linguistic philosophy and metaphysics aid in the deconstruction of the logos monolith by stressing the contingent nature of language and reality.⁹ Fear of the uncertainty that accompanies artistic means of knowledge-attainment is unwarranted, as logical language is shown to be itself uncertain, contextual and proximate. The inability of Christianity to shed its metaphysical enigmas and symbols may be seen as

⁶ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), p.18.

⁷ Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 143.

⁸ Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom*, Vol. 1 (New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 2000), p. 63.

⁹ Brad Cecil, 'I Told You We Weren't Crazy!', ed. Mike Yaconelli, *Stories of Emergence: Moving From Absolute to Authentic* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), p.174.

signs that the nature of truth is at least partly metaphorical.¹⁰ Consequently, a new era may be forming in which the church will again take the arts seriously.

Conventions and Contexts

Owing to the estrangement of the arts, Protestant churches, including Baptist churches, often borrow the art forms of the culture. Such Christianity gleans conventions from the secular and creatively infuses those conventions with sacramental meaning. Undeniably, innovative art can arise from within the Christian community, but in many cases the church's predominance in 'aesthetic-making' has been, for the time being, severely truncated.¹¹ In a sense, the church is returning to its nascent relation to the arts: conversation. Excavations of third century Christian home churches reveal artifacts indicating that the pre-Constantinian church pressed the aesthetic conventions of its culture, such as the well known mythical symbols of Orpheus and the Good Shepherd, into use as representations of Christ in its context.¹² Theologian and aesthetician John Dillenberger explains the phenomenon: "Artists and artisans do not start from scratch; they inherit a tradition which is transformed, so that the style becomes something new, and that occurs only with time."¹³

Learning to 'Read and Write' the Artistic Vernacular

Foremost among theologians to recognise and embrace connections between culture and religion, Paul Tillich endeavoured to bring the role of the arts back to prominence in conveying religious sense. Tillich's understanding of symbols in art as non-verbal communication "pointing beyond themselves" opened fresh avenues by which to express theological witness in the transcendent dimensions of the aesthetic.¹⁴ At the same time, he realised that though the symbolic is not equivalent to what it symbolises, it still exercises a unique role in its meaning.¹⁵ In other words, the use of an artistic convention always carries inherent presuppositions within it. Thus,

¹⁰ Stephen Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 249.

¹¹ Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (London: Macmillan, 1990), chp. 4.

¹² John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities: The Visual Arts and the Church* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1986), pp. 8-10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, Robert C. Kimball (ed.), (Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 54. See also Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 84.

¹⁵ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 55.

the art of culture and the art that conveys Christian meaning are in constant dialogue, unable to divest themselves of the other, making it exceedingly difficult to be content with tacking on the ‘Christian’ appellation to the term ‘art’.¹⁶

Acknowledgement of the dialectical relation between aesthetics and Christian worship creates a host of exciting possibilities as well as a multitude of disputes. Tillich articulates the chief of these obstacles to integrating art in the church, musing,

Are there certain styles more able to express religious subject matter better than others? . . . [T]here is no style which excludes the artistic expression of man’s ultimate concern . . . It is present and may be absent in any situation. But the ways in which it is presented are manifold.¹⁷

It is the manifold modes of presentation that the symbolic arts provide which are most confusing to primarily ‘artless’ churches. If there are multiple ways of symbolising the spiritual then is it enough for art simply to straddle the line between immanence and transcendence, pointing toward an infinite beyond, and does that necessarily steer a course toward the knowledge of Christ?

Tillich defines the sacramental as, “...nothing else than some reality becoming the bearer of the holy in a special way under special circumstances”, and in the context of congregational life and teaching this Tillichian sacramental quality is crucial. At the same time, if it is meeting with the holy that matters in liturgy, will numinous transcendence in the culture’s art work be tantamount to the holy in Christianity? In what ‘special way’ may art external to the church speak about the ultimate? Unfortunately, Tillich’s theology of art doesn’t delve into this matter, understandably attempting to avoid legislating a rigid canon of Christian aesthetics. Rather, his primary focus was to signal the power of symbol in imparting theological presence directly to humankind and alerting the church to revive it as a medium of expression.

McClendon: Moving Past the Numinous

The questions of the affect produced by manifold modes of aesthetic expression on Christianity and in what manner art forms most proximate to the biblical narrative can be discerned remain. Integrating key Tillichian

¹⁶ Jane and John Dillenberger, ‘What is Christian Art’, *The Christian Century* 83 (1966), p. 499.

¹⁷ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 72.

insights, the postfoundational theology of James Wm. McClendon, a baptist writer, advances toward this end. In positing his framework for art analysis in a theological arena, McClendon first draws, like Tillich, on appropriating aesthetics as a symbolic language. But, McClendon adapts the art-as-language template in a new way, using the notion of conventions in the speech-act theory of J.L. Austin.¹⁸ McClendon finds here a similarity he can use as a catalyst to explore meaning in the arts. In essence, his theme is: *How to Do Things Without Words*. Artistic creation and use of aesthetic objects are, for McClendon, actions; a tenet corroborated and well dubbed, an ‘art-act’ by George Steiner.¹⁹

Where Tillich opens the world of art to religious meaning, McClendon moves forward to address the dimension of aesthetic sense by placing art back into the realm of community life and tradition. For McClendon, artists must utilise conventions formed by their presuppositions to communicate to the audience meaningfully. Thus, three dimensions of artistic works emerge: conventions, intentions and reference. Conventions may be viewed as the mediums and methods by which art is crafted: paint, motion or sound. These yield insight into their creator’s intentions and thus provoke questions as to a work’s reference to what is.²⁰ Engaging these basic tools to yield a primary understanding of what constitutes art, McClendon next turns toward a threefold paradigm to reveal stages of artistic meaning.

Elaborating on the arts in North American culture, McClendon’s theory is nonetheless flexible enough to adapt cross-culturally. He concludes, through a detailed sketch of painting, literature and music that aesthetic forms typically oscillate between degrees of the extremes of immanence (empiricism/realism) and transcendence (spiritual/romantic), but that occasionally a profound art is realised which captures humankind in its suffering and travail, stretches out to the ultimate and reflects redeeming hope in the paradox.²¹ Art that begs the gospel questions and finds fortitude to live in the space between the earthly and the infinite, awaiting and striving for transformation, is what McClendon would consider art of the highest import. This art may be labelled ‘eschatological’ in its ‘heaven-and-earth-bridging’ function and it generates innovation in interpreting art that originates from outside the confines of the church.

¹⁸ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology: Witness, Volume III* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2000), pp.134-135.

¹⁹ Steiner, *Real Presences*, p.18.

²⁰ McClendon, *Witness*, p.136.

²¹ McClendon, *Witness*, pp.150, 161-162.

Moreover, it frames criteria for what may be brought into a congregation to transmit the sacramental.

Defining Holiness in Worship

What qualifies as ‘holy’ in Christianity is at issue in McClendon’s posit of a redemptive-eschatological aesthetic suited for the church. The holy, for him, is something which bears more than mere traces of the sublime; it is suffused with salvific allusion and attests to redemptive suffering.²² Though once usurped by Marxism, redemptive suffering is a trajectory uniquely Christian. Anthropologist and theologian David Shenk illustrates this distinctive trait in Christianity by contrasting the flight of Mohammad (hijrah) to Medina with Christ’s path to the cross:

The emigration of Muhammad from suffering in Mecca to political triumph in Medina and the journey of Jesus from triumph in Galilee to crucifixion and death in Jerusalem are movements in opposite directions. . . Islam perceives that suffering for truth is an aberration. In Christian faith, suffering for righteousness is redemptive.²³

Clearly, exceeding the deistic type of spiritual holiness that is void of context or shape found in the transcendent art of Tillich’s model is an enhancement, as artistic meaning is seen against the backdrop of a particularly kenotic mode of Christian holiness observed in the archetype of Christ.²⁴

Thus, aesthetic vehicles implemented in churches ought to diffuse the most stirring implications of any aesthetic act, not only since, “Art and theology, different and yet related . . . are rooted in humanity’s transcendent nature”²⁵, but because the artistic acts of the church ‘make remembrance’ of the inexplicable wonder of a new reality less about finite and infinite being than redemptive ‘becoming’ sacramentally. While the unique focus on redemptive suffering in hope is part of ‘eschatological’ art, the second dimension of remembering and referring to the great redemption narrative yields further surprising applications to aesthetics. All art, even the abstract, either makes reference to what already is or is an elemental attempt to mimic divine ex nihilo.²⁶ Conversely, art that serves Christian

²² Ibid., pp.178-79.

²³ David W. Shenk, *Global Gods: Exploring the Role of Religions in Modern Societies* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1995), p. 286.

²⁴ See Nancey C. Murphy and George F.R. Ellis, *On the Moral Nature of the Universe: Theology, Cosmology and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), chap. 9.

²⁵ Dillenberger, *Artistic Sensibilities*, p. 226.

²⁶ Brown, *Religious Aesthetics*, pp. 111, 135 and Steiner, *Real Presences*, pp. 201-202.

intentions also includes a vital trace of anamnesis, the act of making remembrance of a particular historical reality. In this way art does more than imitate life, it relives, with celebratory metaphor, the actual events of the past and future in the present.²⁷ This bears striking resemblance to McClendon's theology, which stresses the 'anastatic' nature of narrative in which "this is that" and "then is now".²⁸

Having highlighted a matrix for the church to use as an instrument for discerning artistic conventions, implementing the rubric in a test case is crucial.

Test Case 1: The Secular into the Sacred Context

An unadorned brick edifice in Los Angeles almost seems to shudder from the enthusiastic clapping and voices raised in song. Upon a central stage sit numerous musicians. A turn of the head reveals images projected over the north wall of the building on a surface area nearly 30 feet tall by 60 feet wide.

The projection over the blacked-out stained-glass windows initiates a scene from postmodern blockbuster, *Matrix*. The scene evinces a conversation between Neo (Keanu Reeves) and Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburn) in which the latter offers Neo a choice between living a comfortable reality inside the lines of a system predicated on falsehood or the chance to risk discovering the true nature of reality and venture into the real world behind the veneer.

Before Neo can decide the scene crossfades to footage from *The Jesus Film*; Christ is calling his disciples to follow him by the shores of Galilee. Without a cue to the audience, reverberating chimes ring out in a simple triadic pattern. A heavily saturated chord pattern, underpinned by syncopated snare-driven rhythms, follows in cadence with a pulsating metallic pitch. A rasping baritone sings the melody, heartily issuing the evocative lyrics of British gothic-rock songsmith Peter Murphy:

To the crowd
To the world
You were so dry
And with the token bird I made
Sent it to fly

²⁷ Theodore O. Wedel, 'Liturgy and Art', *Religion in Life* 38 (1969), pp. 201-202.

²⁸ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology: Ethics, Volume I* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1986), Part III.

Right to your side
 With a broken wing you sailed
 Oh like winter in July
 A barren river wide
 I'll pray for the flood to wash on you
 It's here I'll be with you.²⁹

Bridging to the next verse, a wordless refrain bearing an uncanny resemblance to the time-honoured hymn 'The Old Rugged Cross' ensues, and a faint echo of that standard seems to whisper solemnly beneath the visceral clatter.

The scene is not a concert hall, a cinema, or a pub; indeed it is not even occurring in a multipurpose venue. This is not a trendy evangelistic rally catering exclusively to the young; a survey of the assembly reveals several age brackets and the characteristic multi-ethnic composition of the Los Angeles area. Remarkably, this is the very postmodern-styled liturgy of Pasadena Foursquare (Pentecostal) Church, on an Easter Sunday no less. The symbols of Christian mystery and truth, though more difficult to locate, are present, transposed like a musical score into a key perhaps more appropriate to the choir here gathered.

Analysis

A postmodern ethos infuses the event. Multi-sensory signification is the norm: shifts and starts, contrasts and interpositions; it is simultaneously enervating and invigorating, and ultimately involving.³⁰ This is a church sensitised to the culture of which it is a part, a community whose senses are fine-tuned to home in on imagery (visual and aural) that echoes their narrative and enriches the sacramental interaction of the liturgy. This congregation is conducting a symphony of salvific metaphor, plundered from the vaults of secular culture; but it is not a benign activity. The use of *Matrix* scenes alluding to freewill and transformative power juxtaposed against *The Jesus Film* footage is a successful transposition of metaphor that contemporary culture can ascertain. Yet, the creative intentions and reference expressed through *Matrix* as a whole, despite selective use, carry with them contextual additives which may be difficult to mitigate: a humanist anti-establishment pseudo-philosophy meshed with eastern religion, a limited understanding of Christian theology, and the

²⁹ Peter Murphy, 'I'll Fall with Your Knife', © Sony Songs Inc./ Notting Hill Music Inc. (BMI) from the album *Cascade*.

³⁰ John P. Newport, *Christianity and Contemporary Art Forms* (Waco, Texas: Word Publishers, 1971), p.100.

employment of physical violence as a path to freedom. Moreover, the cultural pall looming over this film after disclosure of its role in the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999, surely poses limitations to its redemptive value.

For the most part, the aesthetic conventions applied in this liturgy rise to an incarnational artistic level that is able to “enact the new world it means to celebrate”.³¹ But, it is on the radical edges, and for those who perceive in the stylistic mannerism of postmodernity a syncretistic threat, without first making an attempt at investigating the message emitted by the contrivances, this eclectic expression of the holy will never be found liturgically suitable. Likewise, in conveying the church’s message to the world, the world may find it to be no different than engaging their favourite art in the comfort of their own social context. Furthermore, if conventions are used with the intent to ‘lure’ the world into grasping the gospel rather than genuinely inhering the gospel, the ulterior motivation will be seen as betrayal.

Having traced the estrangement and subsequent reintegration of the arts in Christian worship with its communicative power and contextual underpinnings, it has been shown that aesthetic factors warrant far more than an ancillary place in transmitting a sense of the holy. Tillich gave impetus to a renewed sense of the religious dimension in secular art forms. McClendon furnished the conceptual tools to evaluate which art holds distinctively Christian elements through his adaptation of speech-act theory and conventional presuppositions. Consequently, the reinstatement of the aesthetic, in dialogue with culture, has shown itself useful in conveying Christian truth, paving the way for art to embellish the great mystery of salvation. Accordingly, it may follow that theology can nourish art and that its conventions may be absorbed into secular art and still retain their redemptive implications. In the theology of literature conceived by Paul Fiddes, an applicable scheme for a wide range of art inclines itself to precisely such a conclusion.

Test Case 2: The Sacred into the Secular Context

Myriads of blazing video screens dwarf four shadowed figures while ambient waves of music seem to resonate upwards as incense in a cathedral vault. Images lasting mere milliseconds flit across the mosaic of picture tubes and LED’s: news footage, text, symbols, faces, signs. At the epicentre of this frenetic tremor of data overload stands a leather-clad chap in black

³¹ Ibid., p.179.

swinging the microphone like a censer. The atmosphere is psalmodic, stirring allusion to Asaph and his prophetic instrumentalists. An immense throng looking on, hands uplifted, sings in unison with the central figure, 'Alleluia, Alleluia'. Moments prior heard the man in black professing with gospel ethos:

I believe in the Kingdom Come
 Then all the colours will bleed into one
 But yes, I'm still running
 You broke the bonds
 And you loosed the chains
 Carried the cross of my shame
 Oh my shame, you know I believe it
 But I still haven't found
 What I'm looking for,

or plaintively confessing

And I'd join the movement
 If there was one I could believe in
 Yeah I'd break bread and wine
 If there was a church I could receive in,

to the cathartic peal of careening six-string ether.³²

Analysis

In a venue thoroughly pervaded by the marks of postmodernity, the artistic conventions operational above ascribe to reach the holy, while forthrightly admitting dissatisfaction with the present state of things. The religious, or rather redemptive air energising the moment is evident in the admission of sin and struggle coupled with an overcoming sense of hope. The aesthetic means in this instance are undergoing a metamorphosis whose "excess of signification" aims not just toward the spiritual, but manifests a real and sacred presence that reverberates the gospel telos.³³ Truth be told, this is not a charismatic worship service or the liturgy of a technologically inclined American mega-church, this is the ZOO, Irish rock band U2's ZOO TV Tour.

This test case serves as an inversion of the previous example. The former case brought the conventions of the world to the church; closing the circuit, aesthetic conventions have come full circle as culture employs the

³² U2, 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For', © 1987 Island Records Ltd. From the album *The Joshua Tree* and 'Acrobat', © 1991 U2 Admin. By Chappell & Co. From the album *Achtung Baby*.

³³ Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 84.

artistic mediums of sacramental life to its own pursuits. In this inversion the juxtaposition of Christian symbolism has permeated secular mediums just as the secular was apt to seep into the re-shaped context of the church. Undoubtedly, it is still rock n'roll, but the anthems celebrate more than the embodied or the preternatural; they cut past artistic dualism toward a holistic sense of theosis that underscores Christ.

A Conversation between Conventions

Adapting Fiddes' theory concerning the creative dialogue between literature and Christian doctrine for use in the broader scope of art considered here aids explanation of these instances. In creative dialogue, theology moves from the indefatigable mystery of God to proclamation in image (story) as Pasadena Foursquare did in their Easter service. Conversely, imaginative or artistic means progress from images (story) toward an encounter with the ultimate (mystery) as was portrayed in the performance by U2.³⁴ In each approach there is a unique vitality of spirit that dialectically enriches the other. Removing the culture's art from Pasadena Foursquare's liturgy would diminish the deep sense of relevance and substantive weight of Christian truth in their re-interpretative creative acts.

Similarly, negating the scripture-referential language and theodicean posture of U2 would strip away a core element of their art, leaving them just another famous rock group. Philosopher-theologian Nicolas Berdyaev attests to a similar notion in his evaluation of renaissance painting. He much prefers Boticelli over the master of religious art Raphael, on the one hand and Giotto, the premier pagan artist, on the other because Boticelli's, ". . . Venuses always resembled his Madonnas, just as his Madonnas resembled his Venuses".³⁵ Somewhere in the mix is a glimpse of a rectified world, a communion of quantum reality. Aesthetic acts embody this activity and as such their incorporation back into the practice of the church is to be enduringly laboured for.

Crafting an Amenable 'Canon'

In moulding a style of art for liturgical aims the church employs two related actions: the revelatory, which inductively locates doctrinal significance in

³⁴ Paul Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1999), p. 27.

³⁵ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 216-217.

aesthetic conventions, and the imaginative, which deductively harnesses the arts for theology.³⁶ The greatest peril lies in mistakenly assuming that art from every context intends to unfold one and the same meaning and impartially proceed to synthesis.³⁷ Undoubtedly, the message underlying the abstract alienation haunting Franz Kafka's prose is not equivalent to the way of Christ, but as Fiddes expounds in a statement useful for the arts in general,

As long as we do not pretend that the secular writer is actually making the jump from one dimension to the other, then the Christian perspective upon revelation allows the Christian thinker to set any writer's use of metaphor, symbol and story side-by-side with those from the Christian tradition...³⁸

Therefore, art and theology sharpen one another by juxtaposition and transposition rather than by direct synthesis.

In response, churches, I suggest, should train and place lay and pastoral leaders who function as mediators between the deductive (imaginative) and inductive (revelatory) poles in the creative dialogue of an open canon of liturgical aesthetic. Neo-aesthete and pastor Mark Pierson, after an illuminating visit to an avant-garde art installation, surmised that his function in the liturgy was less like the contemporary worship leader and more like the curator of an art gallery, "I provide contexts, experiences of worship for others to participate in".³⁹ If the aesthetic is to avoid the pitfalls of employing 'dead symbols', which are either meaningless or convey the wrong sense, then the role of a curator in the worship of the church seems fitting. Liturgy needs "a maker of a *context* for worship rather than a presenter of *content*".⁴⁰

Through the theories of Tillich, McClendon and Fiddes a trajectory has been set toward reinstalling the arts as an integral rather than peripheral component in transmitting the salvific presence of Christ holistically. Nevertheless, there will be those who balk at art and in an attempt to maintain 'order' treat her as though she was seducing the church away from its commitment to orthodoxy. Despite the inherent doctrinal risk involved in recasting secular aesthetics in a sacred light and its potential infringement on the comfort level of many, the cooperative bond between

³⁶ Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, p. 34-35.

³⁷ Prickett, *Narrative, Religion and Science*, p. 257.

³⁸ Fiddes, *Freedom and Limit*, p. 33.

³⁹ Mark Pierson, 'Reflections on the Shape of the Church in Postmodern Western Cultures,' in *Journal of European Baptist Studies* Volume Three, No 3 (May 2003), p. 34.

⁴⁰ Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, p. 58 and Pierson, 'Shape of the Church,' p. 33.

the arts and theology may ultimately provide a locus where the culture can meet the church with newfound clarity.

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Book Reviews

Albert W. Wardin, Jr.

Gottfried F. Alf, Pioneer of the Baptist Movement in Poland

Baptist History & Heritage Society, Tennessee, 2003. 112 pp, US\$15.00

Anyone familiar with European Baptist history will be aware of Albert Wardin and his 867-page bibliography entitled 'Evangelical Sectarianism in the Russian Empire and the USSR', covering everyone from Alexander (I, II, and III) to Zhidkov (both Jacob and Mikhail); everywhere from Azerbaizhan to Zaporozhe; and anything from Adventist to Zionists. Albert Wardin has recently produced a new book as a result of his extensive research. This one is different; it is a personal biography of Wardin's great-great grand uncle. It concerns one individual working for one denomination in one significant geographic region.

Gottfried Alf is not just a distant ancestor of a leading Baptist scholar, he is the founder of the Baptist movement in Poland. Working mainly through the German population, he also had a significant influence on the Poles. As an itinerant preacher, he visited every major area of Poland, baptizing over 3,600 individuals during his 45 years of ministry. He was a founder of the Adamowo Baptist Church which is considered to be the first Baptist Church in Poland and the third in the Russian Empire. Alf worked among the Baptist leadership of the Russian Turkish Association, the Prussian Association, the Russian Poland Association, and the Union of Baptist Churches in Russia. (He also fathered eleven children, the last being born to his third wife at the age of 63.)

Wardin traces the events of Alf's life as he moves through Poland in the late 19th and early 20th century. The book provides an interesting history, with details of conversations, imprisonments, revivals, and riots. The course of Alf's life as a school teacher turned preacher is greatly influenced by the politics of Poland as it struggled with outside powers, internal conflicts, and human migration. Alf and his fledging Baptist groups are pressurised by Roman Catholic government officials and attacked by Lutheran priests. When Alf slips across the borders into Orthodox territories, he and his 'rebaptizer' are met with the same persecutions and imprisonments. Alf claims to have been imprisoned "thirty times and I am ready to go again whenever needed".

As Wardin traces evangelistic sorties and changing borders, he is mindful of the times when Alf was influencing those within the Russian Empire or Soviet Union. It is an interesting idea which challenges accepted

definitions. To define 'Russian' will always be an impossibility. It is a multi-ethnic, ever-expanding, ever-contracting empire which has asserted influence over many peoples. Often church historians limit the beginnings of the Russian Baptist movement to the baptisms of the first 'real Russians'. They have neglected the previously existing Baptist churches in acquired Russian territories. They downplay Russian-speaking Baptist evangelists who lived in the Russian Empire but grew up in a colony of immigrants. They fail to credit the impact of non-Russian-speaking Russian citizens who gave their lives in missionary service to reach their neighbours. Wardin would like historians to accept all Baptists – regardless of mother tongue, passport, or national heritage – in the Russian Baptist story if they ministered within the Russian Empire.

The book is generally a year-on-year account of Alf's ministry, following his travels, baptisms and arrests. There are interesting vignettes reflecting the physical conditions of 18th century central Europe and German migration. At one point nearly all his 300 church members relocate 800 kilometers east (into the Russian Empire) and Alf must decide if he will follow them. Wardin also includes a chapter on general Baptist church growth dynamics where he parallels Alf and the Polish Baptist movement to Spangler and the Virginian Baptist movement. Wardin's chapter on church life gives an insight into the average Baptist experience during these formative years, seeing Baptists in Poland struggle with self identity as they moved from one association to the next, seeking something that would allow them to legally exist and freely minister in a people group caught between the Russian Slavs and the German Europeans.

For those interested in Eastern European Baptist history and the Polish Baptist story, this book gives new insights into the daily experience of a pioneer Baptist preacher and sheds new light on the Germanic influences of the Polish (perhaps Russian) story.

Greg Nichols

IBTS Doctoral Student, Prague

Brian R. Talbot

The Search for a Common Identity: The Origins of the Baptist Union of Scotland 1800-1870

Paternoster Press, 2003. 402 pp, £24.99

A concern at IBTS has been to see the development of scholarly studies of the histories of Baptist communities across Europe, so this account of the origins of the Baptist Union of Scotland, based on a doctoral thesis, is

welcome. It is an important addition to *The Baptists in Scotland*, edited by David W. Bebbington arising out of the work of the Scottish Baptist History project. This new book by Brian Talbot gives insights into the beginnings of the Scotch Baptists, Haldaneite Baptist Churches and the 'English Baptists' from the 1700s onwards. An interesting chapter is on the development of the Home Missionary Society between 1827–1868.

Baptists in Scotland made several attempts to form a comprehensive Baptist Union between 1827–1869, and the account of these attempts act as salutary insights into the difficulties of achieving successful associating beyond the local; a useful corrective to those today who express concern about birth pangs experienced by some of the newly formed Unions within the EBF. To get things right can take time. The tendency to fissiparity has always been within the Baptist 'genes'.

Bernard Ott

Beyond Fragmentation: Integrating Mission and Theological Education

Paternoster Press, 2001. 382pp. £24.99

This study, based on an earlier doctoral thesis supervised through the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, seeks to assess recent developments in evangelical theological education, focusing on the development of mission studies in evangelical theological education in Germany and German-speaking Switzerland in the period 1960–1995. It is thus interesting to those of us involved in mission education in Europe today. The author is a Swiss evangelical pastor working at the Bienenberg Seminary in Basel. At the heart of this work is an examination of the proposals of David Bosch. Ott critically examines the marginalisation of mission studies in theological education in the past and longs to see them placed at the centre. He struggles, as have many others, with the model of the institutional approach to education and examines whether theological education by extension would be as helpful in Europe as it has been in Latin America and India.

Working in an institution committed to the placing of witness and mission at the heart of our curriculum, and convinced that theology has to be applied to the whole, I commend this book to those leading Bible schools and seminaries in Europe as a stimulus to reflection on the purpose, life and work of similar institutions.

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